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CASUAL LABOUR AT THE DOCKS

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THE RATAN TATA FOUNDATION
(UNIVERSITY OF LONDON)

CASUAL LABOUR AT THE DOCKS

BY
H. A. MESS, B.A.

138774
15/6/16

LONDON
G. BELL & SONS, LTD.
1916

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1916

THE LONDON AND NORWICH PRESS LIMITED, LONDON AND NORWICH, ENGLAND

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PREFACE

THE aim of this book is to give in short outline an account of the casual labour system, if system it may be called, as it prevails at most docks to-day; and by way of illustration to show in some detail how it affects the lives of men and of their families in the neighbourhood in which I have made my home.

In common with all students of casual labour I owe much to Mr. W. H. Beveridge, whose book on Unemployment is the classic of the subject. I have also received a great deal of assistance from Mr. Frederic Keeling.

I am indebted to a docker friend who read the book in manuscript and assured me that he could detect no glaring misdescriptions; to the editor of the *Baptist Times* for allowing me to use one or two articles which I wrote for him; to Miss M. E. Bulkley, of the London School of Economics, for reading my proofs and helping me to get the book through the press; and to Mr. John Wilson, a fellow-resident at Mansfield House, for the photograph which appears as frontispiece, and for much companionship during my inquiries.

H. A. MESS.

Mansfield House,
Canning Town,
February, 1916.

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CASUAL LABOUR AT THE DOCKS

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTORY

A GREAT deal of attention has been paid of late years to the problem of unemployment which was brought so prominently before the public by the dismal processions of shabby men which paraded the streets of London and of the large provincial towns in the winters of 1903-4 and 1904-5. The trade boom of the succeeding years rendered distress from unemployment less acute, but we can scarcely doubt that the bitter cry of the unemployed will be raised again in the future, and if we are to judge by recent labour disputes the tone and temper of the men affected will have become a good deal more bitter and threatening.

The general public is apt to think of the unemployed as men who have been in regular employment, and who through some fault or misfortune

have been thrown out of work, and who need to be helped over an awkward time until they can get into regular work again. But Mansion House Funds, Distress Committees and all the agencies for dealing with distress through unemployment have found that their chief work and their chief difficulty lie with a numerous class of men who are always in and out of work, and whose distress is chronic. They are engaged for short spells, by the day or even by the hour. They are in work to-day and out of work to-morrow. They cannot properly be said to be either employed or unemployed; our economists call them under-employed. Such are the men who hang about warehouses, the men who will carry your bag from the railway station, the men who describe themselves as labourers and say that they can do "anything," and notoriously a very large number of men who earn a precarious livelihood at the docks and wharves.

It is a matter of common observation that ports are usually squalid. In the neighbourhood of docks we look for mean streets. At London, at Liverpool, at Glasgow and Greenock, the same spectacle presents itself; the wretched-looking men on the quays form a striking contrast to the

smartness of the ships. There is casual labour in a great many trades, but in few is it so pervasive and nowhere are the consequences writ so large as in the shipping industry. The reasons lie partly in physical conditions, partly in financial considerations, and partly, too, in the lack of imagination which, failing to see connections and to trace consequences, does not trouble to seek remedies. The coming and going of ships are rendered uncertain by tides and by weather, and the irregularity of their movements is reflected in the employment connected with them. If the vessel is in dock four hundred men will be wanted; if she misses her tide there will be nothing for them to do. A thick fog not only prevents ships from entering or leaving port, but it stops work on those which have arrived. Some kinds of goods cannot be handled in wet weather, and nearly all work will cease in very heavy rain. And when there is work to be done it must be carried on at high pressure. Much capital has been sunk in the large steamship, and it cannot be allowed to be idle. The docks have cost millions to build, and the dues are heavy. Modern business is based on quick despatch, and a continuous use of plant. Therefore, the shipowner

wants his labour to be always at hand. But he only wants it at intervals. Short engagements suit him admirably ; he has his labour when he wants it, and he is not saddled with it at other times. He does not see the men on the days when they are not employed, nor does he know them in their homes, and so he is ignorant of the disastrous effects of this method of engagement. The men's vices are patent enough, and to them he attributes the misery ; they drink, they gamble, they are thriftless, and sometimes they refuse to take work when it is offered. Or if he acknowledges the unsatisfactory nature of casual labour it is with a shrug of the shoulders because it seems to him to be an unescapable condition of the shipping industry.

How close is the relation between casual labour and dire poverty has been testified by scores of observers. Men of all schools of thought are at one in this, though they may differ as to remedies. Mr. Lloyd George goes down to the wharves, and is appalled by the scenes he witnesses. The Unionist Social Reform Committee is prepared with drastic recommendations.[1] The Charity Organisation Society and the Fabian Society,

[1] "Industrial Unrest : A Practical Solution," pp. 33 and 34. John Murray, 1914.

Majority and Minority Reports of the Poor Law Commission, alike deplore it. Social workers everywhere find it almost impossible to make headway against the evils which accompany it.

It may be objected that many well-to-do classes of men, many professional men, as, for instance, barristers and lecturers, are casually engaged, and that, therefore, the mischief is not in the occasional nature of the work but in something else. And this is partly true, although even in the instances cited the disadvantages of intermittent employment and a fluctuating income are noticeable. The other element in the tragedy of dock labour is that so much of the work is unskilled.[1] The skilled casual worker and the permanent unskilled labourer are liable to fall into misfortune, but their distress is for the most part acute rather than chronic; they do not spend their lives in a condition of semi-destitution as so many casual labourers do. The skilled men at the docks, the stevedores who stow cargoes, the lightermen who navigate river craft, and the specialised coal, grain and timber porters, are much above the ordinary docker in standing,

[1] Or rather "low-skilled." No work is entirely unskilled, as the novice at the docks is likely to learn by squeezed fingers and strained muscles.

and they figure to a comparatively small extent amongst the applicants for relief of any kind.

The Port of London consists of some 320 wharves, falling into fairly well-defined groups, and of a number of docks which were built at different times during the last century. On the south side of the river are the Surrey Commercial Docks, used mainly for cargoes of timber and of grain. On the north side there are the St. Katherine's Dock, lying in the shadow of the Tower, the London Docks, the West India Docks, which cut across the great bend of the river between Limehouse and Poplar, the Millwall Docks in the Isle of Dogs, used like the Surrey Commercial Docks mainly for timber and grain but in reversed proportions, and the East India Docks at Poplar, the last of the docks in the county of London.

Outside London there are the Tilbury Docks, twenty-five miles down the river, and comparatively detached from the main system. Nearer at hand, just across the border of London, there are the Victoria and Albert Docks, with which we are more particularly concerned in this book. The Victoria Dock, which was opened in 1855, is in the county borough of West Ham, and it is familiarly known in the district as the " old dock "

in contra-distinction to the Albert Dock which was opened in 1880. The latter is partly in West Ham and partly in East Ham. The two docks are joined by a channel twenty-five feet deep; their combined length is three miles, and their combined water area is 183 acres. The entrance to the Albert Dock at Gallions is ten and three-quarter miles by river from London Bridge.

The *Board of Trade Labour Gazette* publishes monthly a return of the number of labourers who have been employed each day[1] in the docks and at the principal wharves of London. In 1913 the greatest number employed on any one day was 18,228 on January 7, and the two smallest numbers were 11,164 on December 27 and 12,335 on August 2, the Saturday before the Bank Holiday. The next lowest figure, it should be noted, was 13,222. With the exception of a very few days in the year the range of variation is between 13,000 and 17,000. The average daily number employed in 1913 was 15,060.

A good deal of caution is needed in the interpretation of these figures. No distinction is made between the various kinds of labourers—grain-

[1] Except Sundays and holidays; there is, however, a considerable amount of Sunday work, and it is increasing. The figures for Tilbury are given in a separate return.

porters, crane-drivers, lightermen, etc. The stevedores are entirely omitted. A large number of small wharves make no return. It is important also to bear in mind that a man is returned as having worked a day whether he has worked for a few hours only or for twenty-four hours, and that if, as sometimes happens, he works for two employers in a single day he counts as two in the return. Our information as to the volume of the work and as to the kinds of work required is, therefore, very incomplete.

Nor are we on more certain ground when we try to estimate the number of men who compete for this work. According to the census return of 1911 there were 19,504 dock or wharf labourers in the county of London. To these must be added 6,173 who live in West Ham, and also a sprinkling of men in East Ham, Leyton, Walthamstow, Tottenham and other extra-metropolitan districts. But in addition there are a great many men who work occasionally at the docks and who will be returned under some other heading, such as general labourer or builder's labourer, or under the occupation which they usually follow or which, perhaps, they followed before they became dock labourers. All we can

do in our present state of knowledge is to form a rough estimate both of the volume of work and of the number of men who obtain it. Probably we shall not be far wrong in surmising that on an average day something like 30,000 men seek for work at the docks and wharves of London, and that something like 20,000 men obtain it.

CHAPTER II

METHODS OF ENGAGEMENT

We come now to a consideration of the methods actually employed in the engagement of the dockers who are daily required for work at the docks and wharves of London; and more particularly we are to examine the conditions of engagement of the 2,500 to 3,000 who work in the Victoria and Albert Docks.

The employers fall into three classes. There is first of all the Port of London Authority, the successor of the old dock companies, employing about one-fifth of the total labour of the port; secondly there are the shipping companies and the wharfingers; and thirdly there are firms of contractors which undertake for the shipping companies the loading and unloading of vessels. The last-named class tends to increase in importance. The staff of the Port of London Authority is the best organised; whilst great diversity of method and latitude for the peculiarities of fore-

men are found amongst the shipping companies and the wharfingers.

Men are engaged in the Victoria and Albert Docks either at or near the offices of the various shipping companies, or at one or two recognised centres of employment. Of these centres Custom House railway station is the chief; it stands about half-way down the Victoria Dock on the north side. At a quarter to seven on an average morning some hundreds of men may be seen turning towards it from the neighbouring streets; whilst large numbers arrive by tram and train, often from a considerable distance, as, for instance, from King's Cross or from Walthamstow. A glance at these men suffices to reveal the presence of a social problem of some magnitude. To begin with, very few of them are well clad. They have not the look of self-respecting mechanics. Their clothes are patched and makeshift, and their boots are often in a deplorable condition. It is quite obvious that many of them are ill-nourished. Altogether they seem inadequately equipped for the work they have to do.

Such as they are they line up along the road which runs inside the dock area, skirting the quays. If it is a busy morning there will be a

half dozen or more groups at intervals of a few yards; each group will contain anything from forty to a couple of hundred men. A little before seven the foremen appear, and proceed to select from the various groups the men they want. The methods differ from company to company, and from foreman to foreman, but usually they start by reading down a list of "preference" men. As each man is called he steps across from the crowd. One can notice growing anxiety on the faces of those who remain. If it is a slack time the list of names may not be exhausted; but if on the other hand a great many hands are required the foreman may proceed to call men from the crowd. An experienced foreman knows a good many casuals by name, in some cases as many as 400, and when he no longer remembers names there will still be faces which are familiar to him. "I keep no list," said one foreman, "but I have a number of names in my head. If I don't know a man's name I make up one for him, and say 'Come along, Ginger,' or 'You with the white tie.'" In the last resort he will pick from the group in front of him the men who impress him most favourably. At one "call" which the writer attended there were some sixty men

waiting. The foreman stood on the raised ledge of a warehouse and eyed the crowd all over as if it were a herd of cattle. Then very deliberately he beckoned a man with his finger, and after a considerable interval a second and a third, until he had taken ten in all. There was an evident enjoyment of a sense of power, understandable enough as human nature goes, and the whole proceedings were horribly suggestive of the methods of a slave market.

It is during the latter stages of a heavy call that disturbances are most frequent. The men begin to fidget and to push; those who are small and weak are shoved aside by the more burly, and sometimes a struggling mass of men may be seen elbowing and fighting to get to the front, and to attract the foreman's attention. At one of the big calls on the south side of the Albert Dock the men wait to be taken on in a kind of cattle pen.[1] The foremen mount into booths, not unlike pulpits in appearance, and from them they distribute the metal tallies which are the token of engagement. The spectacle of some scores of men struggling violently is by no means infrequent here. Occasionally a foreman will

[1] This erection has recently disappeared in the course of alterations connected with the construction of a new dock.

toss a tally to a man at the rear of the crowd, just as a morsel of food might be thrown to a dog. Towards the close of the call all hands will be lifted in competition for the foreman's attention, and stretched forward to secure the coveted tally. The scene reminds one of the crowd of suppliants in "Oedipus Rex," or the Roman crowd in Sir Herbert Tree's staging of "Julius Cæsar." These scrambles are not without their danger of serious injury. The authors of "West Ham" write: "The men selected by the foremen are given metal tickets or passes. Sometimes foremen will shirk the selection of the whole number required, and when they have given out a certain number of tickets will hold the rest in their hands to be snatched by whoever can get them. Such a fight was seen by the writers, who were informed that it was by no means an isolated instance. The brutalising and demoralising effect on the men requires no comment. Doubtless this procedure would not be countenanced officially by any of the shipping companies, but it is due to the weakness of the individual foremen and their fear of offending men who habitually work for them. A weak foreman may get into difficulties if there is a good deal of

work, and therefore a possibility of men outside the ordinary gang being taken on; or if he has promised work to several men, and even accepted drinks on the strength of such promises, and then finds there is not as much work as he expected. Accidents sometimes occur in these scrambles for tickets."[1]

The men complain bitterly of these scrambles, in which clothes are torn, and kicks, scratches and even bites are received. Nor do the foremen always escape scatheless. In the spring of 1913 a foreman who was distributing tallies in the Victoria Dock to a crowd of casuals was badly scratched and was laid up for some time with blood poisoning.

Within a few minutes of seven o'clock the first call of the day is over; the fortunate men are already proceeding to work, whilst those who have not been selected—very probably the greater number—have some fifty minutes to wait. At seven forty-five the process will be repeated, and a considerable number more will be taken on. At eight forty-five there is a third call, and then there is nothing more until a quarter to one.

[1] "West Ham," by Howarth & Wilson, p. 200.

These intervals of some fifty minutes between the early morning calls are most unfortunate; the men have not sufficient time to go home, unless they happen to live in the immediate neighbourhood, and they are virtually compelled to be loafers. Usually the crowd at Custom House pours across the railway bridge and into the street, where two huge public-houses do a roaring trade. When it is remembered that many of the men have come from a distance, and often without breakfast, this is not to be wondered at. In wet or cold weather the temptation is of course very much increased; in fine weather the interval is sometimes spent in gambling. After the nine o'clock call, when comparatively few men are taken on, the unemployed men settle down to kill time until one o'clock. A little crowd gathers round each public-house; whilst others lean up against church railings or any convenient wall. A few of the more energetic may find jobs to do at home, or may go to the public libraries, but for all of them the day has been effectively spoilt. For the mass of them it means—must inevitably mean—a day's loafing. It does not require many months of this kind of life to ruin a man's morale.

There are further calls, comparatively unimportant, at 5.45 p.m., and 10.45 p.m. The excessive number of calls has long been recognised as one of the evils of the present system of engagement. At the time of the great dock strike of 1889 their reduction to two only, 8 a.m. and 4 p.m., was originally demanded by the men, but the demand was unfortunately allowed to drop. This reduction is still one of the items in the programme of the Dockers' Union, which fully recognizes the havoc which is wrought by these intervals of idle waiting ; and in particular objects to the three morning calls at intervals of an hour.

Very obviously the foreman occupies a position of the greatest importance in the dispensation of the docks. It is largely left to him to decide who shall be employed and who shall be left. Firms vary in this respect, and some of them supervise the lists of preference men more carefully than others and expect their foremen to adhere to them. But in general the attitude of the employers is well indicated by the remark of a director of an important shipping line that labour was " such a bagatelle " in their business that the heads of firms were content to leave

the control in the hands of foremen.[1] In times of special scarcity of labour, such as the South African War or the strikes of 1911 and 1912, methods of engagement become of course of more importance and receive a considerable amount of attention. After the strike of 1912, for instance, many of the foremen in the docks would have been glad enough to take back their old hands, but attempts to do so were defeated by the newcomers, who complained at the head offices, usually with the result that instructions were sent down to the foremen to give them the preference.

But in an ordinary way the foreman is not much hampered in his choice, at all events as regards the more casual men. To the mob who struggle for tallies at the close of the call he is a veritable arbiter of fate. He can take them or reject them, he can call them to-day and ignore them to-morrow, he can keep them "on the stones" if they offend him; there is no one to say him nay. He may be influenced by many motives, kindly or otherwise, honourable or ignoble. It would be surprising if there were not abuses of this system of patronage, which makes in the

[1] "West Ham," by Howarth & Wilson, p. 214.

first place for servility on the part of the men. The foreman knows his power and the men know it too. And the foreman is not far enough removed from them in status to be impartial, nor sufficiently well remunerated to be above petty corruption. Complaints of bribery are heard by nearly every investigator of casual labour. In the nature of things they are hard to substantiate, but there can be little doubt that they are well founded. Money bribes are probably comparatively rare; more often corruption takes the form of standing drinks[1] or cigarettes. It is quite easy to understand how difficult it is to draw the line between genuine social intercourse at the public-house and shameless bribery, and it is easy to see that the one may soon degenerate into the other. A quotation may be allowed from a temperance pamphlet which the writer drew up some time ago in consultation with a committee of working men:

"*A Word to Foremen.*"

"Plenty of men will want to treat you. Don't let them; they will respect you all the more if you don't. And if you take drinks from them they will expect you to give them jobs, or to give

[1] This was written before the No Treating order came into operation.

their friends jobs; one good turn deserves another. By and by you will expect the men you take on to stand you treat. Everybody knows what goes on in public-houses on Sunday nights; some foremen don't expect to have to pay for their drinks." [1]

Three public-houses in South-West Ham were specifically mentioned by members of this committee in the course of discussion, as being places at which this species of bribery was flagrant. Even when drinks are not stood, public-houses serve unfortunately as informal labour bureaux; men frequent them to hear what is doing, and because they will get to know the foremen there. A teetotal docker stands to lose a good deal in the course of a year because he is not in the circle. "I get sick when I see heavy drinking men taken on and myself left out," said one man to the writer.[2] Dockers are not alone in this respect, but there are few occupations in which there are such strong inducements to drink and so much to be lost by avoiding the public-house.

[1] "Why Men Drink and Why They Should Not," by the Committee of Mansfield House P.S.A. Brotherhood.

[2] Cf C.O.S. Report on Unskilled Labour, 1908, p. 159—Stevedore's Evidence.

Other methods of levying a tax on the men's earnings are mentioned from time to time. It is said that some of the foremen's wives keep shops, and that it is advisable for men who hope to be picked to deal at them. One foreman was said to be an owner of small property in the neighbourhood of the docks and to take good care that his tenants did not lack employment. And as is only natural, there are relatives and friends whom the foreman would like to work into the gang, or for whom he wants to find work during a period of slackness in their own trade. It is only fair to add that few firms would tolerate open corruption on the part of foremen if it came to their knowledge and that occasional dismissals do something to check these bad practices. Patronage and its abuse are not of course confined to dockers; many of the above cases could be paralleled in other trades, and there are analogies in the highest walks of life. But in few trades are so many men affected by the abuse, and in few also are the opportunities so constant and so easy. When a man is in regular employment it requires the employer's or the foreman's initiative to dismiss him; in the case of the casual labourer, on the contrary, it is

only the foreman's initiative daily repeated which can keep him at work. If a foreman of a gang of permanent hands desires to find room for a friend or relative at the expense of some member of his gang he can only do so by a dismissal, a decided step. But when a foreman gives casual labour to a new-comer it is not obvious who is injured by the substitution. It may be a casual who is barely known to him, or the loss may be spread over several men. There is no clear substitution as in the former case.

Even if there is no suspicion of unfairness in the foreman's dealings with his men the docker's life is far too dependent on his personal connection with an individual foreman. A shrewd French observer has well remarked on this :

" Generally speaking, apart from all question of interested motive, legitimate or otherwise, on the part of the foreman, the system of itself tends to increase the uncertainty of engagement for the worker. It interposes between the worker and the big employer, who is stable, a sort of sub-contractor, who is not stable. It deprives men of the benefit of sharing in the security of big businesses, and substitutes for it a sort of personal

tenure, which makes them dependent on an employer who is weak, capricious, temporary, liable to death, dismissal and to superannuation." [1]

Just as the docker suffers from the excessive number of "calls," so he suffers from the excessive number of "stands," that is to say, places at which men are engaged. At present there are a dozen quite distinct centres in the Victoria and Albert Docks alone, and there must be well over a hundred at the various docks and wharves of London. The large number of "stands" is prejudicial in two ways. In the first place it necessitates a great deal of painful wandering from "stand" to "stand" in the hope of getting work, and in the second place it increases the number of men who are kept hanging about in a state of chronic under-employment. Whenever the Dockers' Union has been strong it has insisted on a reduction in the number of stands; and in the interval between the strikes of 1911 and 1912, when the men were probably as powerful as they have ever been, all dockers in the Victoria and Albert Docks were taken on either at Custom House Station or at Connaught Road, and

[1] "Le Travail Casuel dans les Ports Anglais," par J. Malègue. Paris, 1913, p. 69.

proceeded afterwards to the various quays. The Stevedores' Union, which is much stronger than the Dockers' Union, has always insisted on these central "stands" for its members, and train or tram fares are paid them from Custom House to the nearest point in the docks. But the stevedores, too, have been considerably weakened since the strike of 1912, and it is not certain that they will be able to maintain the privilege, especially as the number of non-union stevedores in the docks has increased rapidly in the last two years. It is probable that both dockers and stevedores have themselves to blame in considerable measure for the opposition of employers to engaging men at centres removed some distance from the quays. The practice lent itself to abuse and foremen waited impatiently for the arrival of men whom they had engaged. Disciplinary measures were adopted by some of the trade union branches, but unfortunately they were not sufficiently stringent.

On the other hand the disadvantages to the casual of the scattered "stands" are fairly obvious. He has to find out in the first place where there will be the best chance of engagement, and this involves considerable trouble and loss of time,

besides conducing to the use of the public-house as a clearing house for information. Where a number of foremen take on at a common centre the chances of engagement are multiplied, and the casual can slip from one group to the other. But where the " stands " are scattered the casual may find when he turns up at the 7 o'clock call that there is little likelihood of his being wanted ; he has then to hurry off to another stand, it may be a mile away. This tramping from place to place in search of work is very fatiguing and very disheartening. The wife of an elderly casual labourer thus described her husband's experiences :

" B is about 60, and gets very little work now. He gets up at five [1], and goes all over the place in search of it ; he comes home dead tired and cries. I tell him sometimes to give up looking for work, but he says that would look as if he were lazy."

This daily agony is the fate of many a man who from age or some other cause has lost firm hold on employment. There are painful scenes when the unfortunate husband returns home, usually about ten o'clock, to report failure.

[1] This man, like a good many other dockers, was in the habit of attending calls at factories at 6 and 6.30 before going to the docks.

Domestic life is often embittered by nervous irritation on the husband's side, and by suspicion on the wife's side that her man is not doing his best. And indeed he may easily fall into a despondent state in which his search for work is perfunctory.

It is not easy to count crowds, and the following figures must be taken as approximate only, but they may be regarded as typical since they were taken quite casually :

Date.	*Time.*	*Place.*	*No. waiting.*	*No. taken on.*
30.6.13	7 a.m.	Custom House Station	120	40
30.6.13	8 a.m.	Victoria Dock, south side	60	10
1.7.13	7 a.m.	Albert Dock, south side	300	300
1.7.13	8 a.m.	Albert Dock, north side	150	75
8.7.13	9 a.m.	Custom House Station	110	6

The lack of co-ordination in the docks was strikingly illustrated on July 1. The writer with two companions witnessed the " call " on the south side of the Albert Dock at 7 a.m. It was a large crowd and a good deal of pushing and scrambling went on. Practically every one present was engaged (this was a most unusual occurrence), and the foremen would have taken on more men if they had been present. After the " call " we walked round the dock and found some 150 men waiting for the 8 o'clock " call " of another firm. They had not heard of the brisk demand

for men less than a mile away. One might think the telephone had never been invented!

The multiplicity of "stands" and the absence of communication increases the surplus of labour necessary to meet fluctuations in demand. The foreman of an isolated "stand" will try to insure the attendance of a large number of men to meet possible emergencies. He can do this in several ways. He may, for instance, visit his displeasure on those who absent themselves from calls by "drilling" them or "standing them upon the stones"—that is to say, passing them over later on when he has work to give. Or he may make a practice of distributing work amongst a large circle of men, and thus encouraging them to attend. This latter procedure is by no means unpopular with the men themselves, who often advocate out of mistaken generosity a policy of sharing the work round.

Similar conditions prevail at the other docks in the Port of London. At Tilbury the competition appears to be less severe and there is not so much scrambling for work. On the other hand conditions are distinctly worse at the wharves which skirt the river from London Bridge to Wapping. A friend of the writer spent

a great part of December, 1913, making observations in this district. He communicates the following approximate figures:—

Date.	*Time.*	*Place.*	*No. waiting.*	*No. taken on.*
13.12.13	10 a.m.	Lower Thames Street	200	60
	10 a.m.	Lower Thames Street	150	45
	10 a.m.	Lower Thames Street	150	40
	10 a.m.	Lower Thames Street	50	16
(These four calls were in rapid succession; two of them were for warehousemen and two for stevedores).				
20.12.13	7 a.m.	Lower Thames Street	80	56
	8 a.m.	High Street, Wapping	200	70
	10 a.m.	High Street, Wapping	60	30

Of one large wharf he writes, " There is a good deal of pushing and struggling at the calls here, the men rushing across the road and lining up on the other side directly the foreman appears. He walks up and down the line, inspecting the men exactly as though they were cattle and as they are passed over they run along to take up a position further on to get another chance."

The particularly bad feature about many of the wharves is that the men are taken on at odd times in addition to the regular hours of call. They are, therefore, kept hanging about the streets indefinitely. My friend witnessed one call at a few minutes past midnight, and he heard stories of men waiting for six or seven hours for a " call " which never took place. It is said

that some men wait about in the neighbourhood of the wharves from 3 or 4 a.m. till 5 p.m.

The information which he gleaned as to "drilling" and as to the petty corruption amongst foremen corresponded closely with that obtained in the Victoria and Albert Docks.

CHAPTER III

IRREGULAR EARNINGS AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES

THERE is considerable difficulty in obtaining precise information as to the earnings of dock labourers; not only do they vary very much from man to man, but the earnings of any particular man will vary very much from time to time. Employers cannot give them, since most of their men will work at times for other firms. Very few men in casual employment keep a systematic record of their earnings; it is scarcely to be expected that they should do so. The great majority of London waterside labourers are paid not weekly but nightly.[1] "Give us this day our daily bread" is a very literal and urgent prayer with them. Some will even be paid twice in the course of a single day.

These daily payments of uncertain amount are a great danger to the man of weak character.

[1] The chief exception is the permanent staff of 3,500 labourers employed by the Port of London Authority. These men are paid 28s. to 30s. weekly and earn in addition a bonus for piece-work.

The temptations to drink are multiplied. He can so easily conceal from his wife the particulars of his earnings, and indeed deny that he has obtained work at all. Most wives of dockers do not know what their husbands earn ; they only know what their husbands give them, and that is not a dependable amount. "He gives me twenty-five shillings when he has a full week," says one. " Sometimes he gives me a pound, sometimes twenty-four shillings, sometimes. twenty-eight shillings—and he has given me thirty shillings," says another, and one gathers from her tone that the thirty shillings is a high water-mark not often reached. Some women whose husbands drink heavily will form an idea of their earnings by turning out their pockets when they are drunk. A good deal can be learnt from street-corner orators, especially during labour disputes, and the shrewdest of the women treasure up the bits of information and question their husbands as to extra payments and overtime. But the uncertainty is a fruitful source of domestic friction.

A docker's money is good when he is employed, and considerable sums can be earned at times by working long hours at a stretch, or by Sunday

work.[1] Against these must be put the slack periods which come to nearly all men. These short, sharp bursts of lucrative work do not do them any good in the long run. Strong, young men like them, but they are very exhausting and help to age men prematurely. "Quick come, quick go," is the common experience in money matters, and where money is earned by excessive fatigue a good deal of it is sure to go in extra expenses or in extra indulgences.

There are certainly wide differences amongst dockers. Round each foreman there will be a body of men whose chance of employment, like the atmosphere round the earth, grows thinner and thinner until it diminishes to the vanishing point at which a man cannot subsist at all. There will be a nucleus of men in practically permanent employment; others further down the foremen's

[1] Twenty-four hours is the longest period men are allowed to work without a break. In February, 1915, some dockers who were charged with stealing, in West Ham Police Court, were stated to have earned the following amounts:—

	£	s.	d.
Four days' work	2	16	4
Three days' work	1	10	9
One day's work	0	10	8
Eleven days' work	5	5	0
A day and a night	1	4	6
A day and a night	1	3	9

Stratford Express, February 20, 22 and 27, 1915.

These earnings include a war bonus, and are, therefore, higher than they would have been in normal times.

TABLE I.

EARNINGS OF A DOCKER, 1896–1912.

Year.	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	April.	May.	June.	July.	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Total.
	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.	£ s. d.
1896	9 17 9	8 18 3	8 6 6	2 8 0	4 0 6	7 18 4	5 5 0½	5 8 7½	4 6 8	6 11 0	7 2 6	8 13 10	78 17 0
1897	14 2 6	10 11 6	12 15 0	9 11 11	8 1 11	13 1 7	12 3 5	9 8 10	7 6 10½	5 0 6	7 0 4	5 3 0	114 7 4½
1898	8 13 1	6 8 0	11 15 9	6 18 7	12 9 5	4 4 4	8 12 2	12 8 2	10 2 10	9 6 11	9 0 2	7 2 0	107 1 5
1899	4 7 2	6 4 6	8 1 0	7 4 0½	7 12 1	8 13 0½	7 19 8½	7 16 0	2 19 3	7 14 6	6 9 1	3 10 4	78 10 8½
1900	7 12 4½	5 11 9	7 3 3	7 6 8	8 0 0	1 18 6	5 8 7	7 5 1	5 17 10	6 15 4	9 9 6	6 15 0	79 3 10½
1901	No entries	4 19 5	8 15 1	9 0 10	8 11 10	8 0 0	9 11 8	7 16 6	4 15 5	8 19 0	7 8 4	8 13 3	86 11 4
1902	6 16 8	6 9 9	7 13 0	6 5 11	8 0 7	7 16 10	9 12 6	7 5 11	6 6 1	8 7 0	7 1 6	7 8 1	89 3 10
1903	5 6 5	6 5 7	8 13 10	8 12 0	6 13 5	7 12 11	5 18 0	7 14 7	7 14 5	8 18 10	8 0 0	7 9 5	88 19 5
1904	8 7 0	8 7 6	7 16 4	7 8 8	7 19 3	7 9 0	6 9 8	7 6 5	6 17 7	3 10 4	Illness.	Illness.	71 11 9
1905	Illness.	3 18 0	7 4 8	4 15 2	6 19 0	5 13 4	8 1 5	6 9 2	5 9 3	7 5 1	5 16 2	5 10 5	67 1 8
1906	7 6 5	6 15 10	8 13 7	7 0 8	7 1 10	7 14 4	8 9 7	6 10 6½	5 1 3	5 13 2½	7 13 5	5 1 7	83 2 3
1907	6 14 8	6 15 1	7 13 10	7 2 11	8 15 7	8 4 0	8 7 5	7 8 9	7 4 8	6 2 11	7 6 11	7 2 3	88 19 0
1908	7 2 8	7 10 1	9 0 3	10 7 10	12 6 3	7 8 6	8 14 2	4 11 2	4 2 5	5 14 2	7 8 6	7 3 2	91 9 2
1909	7 1 8	5 12 11	7 16 1	6 4 4	7 7 0	5 9 2	4 15 7	10 7 10	5 8 5	6 3 6	5 10 3	7 13 4	79 10 1
1910	7 1 9	6 15 1	8 1 1	6 10 9	6 0 11	7 2 7	6 13 1	7 4 1	5 1 1	5 13 9	6 11 5	6 10 5	79 6 0
*1911	7 19 1	6 15 5	9 1 11	6 8 9	6 13 5	6 5 5	7 19 4	3 14 8	8 18 10	7 18 7	8 9 10	6 5 6	86 10 9
†1912	7 3 6	8 5 8	8 19 10	8 7 6	6 14 6	7 16 0	Strike.	Strike.	7 0 6	5 11 8	6 18 6	6 12 8	73 10 4

* Strike lasting August 1 till August 19.

† Strike lasting May 24 till August 5.

list who will average three or four days a week ; and there will be some who will only pick up a scrap of work now and then.

A friend of the writer, a docker of good standing, has been kind enough to lend a record which he has kept of his earnings during the last seventeen years. This man, who is, as might be supposed, of superior character and intellect, has put down every day in his diary what ship he has worked on, and how much he has earned, and the little pile of diaries makes a curious and interesting study. What impresses one most is the absolutely incalculable nature of the fluctuations. There is no discoverable rhythm. In 1896 and in 1899 he earns between £78 and £79 ; in the two intervening years he earns £114 and £107. In 1908 he earns £91 ; in 1909, for no apparent reason, his earnings drop to £79 again. These are big differences on a small income. With the figures spread out before us, totalled and averaged, it is possible to say roughly what weekly wage he might have reckoned as normal. But as it came to him in daily payments ranging from 2s. to £1 10s. 3d., and with intervals of vain search for work of anything up to a fortnight, it was impossible for him to gauge at all

nearly his earning powers. He could not tell what the constant changes meant and what the future would bring ; whether small takings meant a permanent drop in income or merely a spell of lean weeks ; whether a series of good weeks justified him in raising his standard of living or not. A man so steady and sensible would show himself capable of managing so tricky an income, but to many the pitfalls would prove fatal. Either they would be tempted into living at the rate of their better times, in which case lean weeks would mean debt and an approach to destitution ; or they might, as not a few seem to do, accustom themselves to a low standard of life and treat any surplus as a happy windfall justifying self-indulgence.

But such men belong to the better class of dock labourers and we need not waste pity on them. At the worst their needs are supplied, at the best there is a considerable margin for luxuries. Their earnings must be discounted to some extent because of their fluctuations, but they remain good. It is when we get lower down the scale that pity is called for. There are a great many dock labourers who earn on an average something between a pound and twenty-

five shillings. Upon these men and their families life presses very hardly. It is not always sufficiently borne in mind by those who discuss the question of a living wage how much the problem is complicated by irregularity of earnings. Life on a pound a week is difficult enough, but it is child's play to the management of an income which may be thirty shillings one week and ten shillings the next.

How for instance is a woman to keep house on an income like this:—£1 3s. 6d.; 18s. 8d.; 7s. 8d.; £1 3s. 2d.; £2 7s. 4d.; nil; £2 1s. 4d.; £1 0s. 10d.; 19s. 2d.; 18s. 2d.; 14s. 4d., which were the earnings for eleven weeks of a London docker in the summer of 1913? How is she to tell on what scale she is justified in spending? Her notion of an average is probably of the haziest.[1] Add to that the fact that even if the income were evenly spread there would be a steady pressure of needs, and one can easily imagine that the temptation to spend money as fast as it comes in is overwhelming, and the distress in the lean weeks correspondingly severe.

[1] In one East End school which I know, the headmaster has introduced the practice of setting boys sums dealing with average earnings. "If A earns 5s. on Monday, 2s. 6d. on Tuesday, nothing on Wednesday, etc., what are his average daily earnings?" It is to be hoped that the new generation will profit by the instruction.

There are various ways in which the irregularities of income are to some extent smoothed out. The landlord will show a good deal of forbearance in the matter of arrears of rent—as indeed he is bound to do if he is to have tenants at all. Credit can be obtained at the corner shop, for which, however, it may be necessary to pay dearly by continued custom in spite of high prices and poor quality of goods. But the chief financier of the poor is the pawnbroker. In bad times a good deal of the family furniture and clothing will find its way to the pawnshop to be redeemed slowly and painfully in happier days. When credit is exhausted and there is little left to pawn—or even before, if the husband and wife have a horror of debt—the family has to economise in food. Usually the husband is the last to suffer in this respect, not because of selfishness on his part, but as a matter of policy ; his strength must be kept up at all costs, since the sale of his labour is the chief hope of the family. But in very hard times he too will be reduced to bread and dripping diet.

Competing with the pawnbroker, but of worse repute, is the moneylender, from whom many a hard-pressed wife will obtain a loan at the rate

of a penny or perhaps twopence in the shilling per week. For small sums the money-lender is as cheap as the pawnbroker, and there is the advantage that there is no need to part with any article as a pledge. But for larger amounts the high rate of interest tells heavily and the money-lender is a far more dangerous ally than the pawnbroker. Many a woman has commenced by borrowing a shilling or two, and has gone on floundering deeper and deeper into debt. Fear of discovery by the husband makes her life wretched, and the money-lender will play upon it to keep her in subjection. When men borrow the money-lender has not the same power, since the husbands are comparatively indifferent to their wives knowing.

In the docks themselves a man can usually obtain a "sub"[1] from his firm, that is to say a small payment on account, and this is a very convenient arrangement in such cases, for instance, as a man's starting work after a long spell of unemployment, when very likely he has come down to the docks without breakfast. Where firms do not "sub," and often where they do, there is usually a money-lender, either a foreman

[1] Short for "subsistence money."

or one of the men, from whom accommodation can be obtained. In this matter of borrowing, as in many other things, the casual labourer is at a disadvantage as against the man in permanent employment. In most factories and workshops there is a money-lender and his rate is usually either a penny or twopence in the shilling per week or part of a week. That is to say that the man is expected to repay the loan when he draws his wages. In the docks in the same way a man is expected to repay his loan when he gets his pay. But since he is paid daily the term of the loan is only for a single day. A casual labourer in the docks pays *twopence in the shilling per day*. He borrows a shilling at ten in the morning and pays back one and twopence at five o'clock in the afternoon. The lender is waiting at the pay-box to receive the money. For who knows where a casual labourer will be working the next day, or whether he will be working at all ?

The docker of better standing may obtain more favourable terms. Very likely he will be allowed to repay the loan when the ship finishes, since a man high up the foreman's list is sure of employment as long as the ship is in dock.

"Subbing" would certainly seem to be less objectionable than recourse to money-lenders, and it is probable that, as things are at present, firms are well advised to allow the practice in moderation. But both "subbing" and borrowing from money-lenders are resorted to not only by the needy casual for his urgent needs, but by men who are not hard pressed. Men will "sub" to drink and "sub" to gamble; they will "sub" from mere habit, and they will "sub" on principle, lest such an excellent facility should fall into desuetude. Improvidence is a common failing of the human race, and lenders and borrowers are found in all ranks of society. Very similar practices go on in highly respectable City offices. But the temptations and the penalties are multiplied, the practice is more widespread and more destructive where, as at the docks, a large number of men gain an irregular and often scanty livelihood.

In the poorer families the money which the husband brings home is largely supplemented from other sources. The day on which the children will be able to leave school is eagerly looked forward to, and they are hurried into work which will bring in as much as possible at

once, without much regard to future prospects. And in this way hundreds of boys are started on inauspicious careers which will bring them by and by to the same plight as their fathers are in. The girls will go into factories or, more rarely, into domestic service. Girls would seem to be more dependable as supplementary earners than boys. In addition the mother will very likely be a wage earner. Perhaps she will take in washing, or go charing, or she may make shirts or ties or clothing of some sort. The connection of woman's homework with casual labour has long been recognised. A large number of the homeworkers in West Ham have husbands in irregular work, and a good proportion of these are dockers.[1] In the better families the woman will only do such work when times are specially bad and necessity drives. Very often in such cases the husband, when he comes home from his fruitless search for employment, will help his wife. He can sew buttons on knickers and in many little ways expedite the work. In some cases he will do the housework and look after the children, who of course are bound to suffer from lack of the mother's attention.

[1] See "West Ham," by Howarth & Wilson, p. 268.

But unhappily there is a tendency for the husband to rely more and more upon the earnings of his wife and children. He loses the sense of humiliation at being dependent upon them, and comes to look upon it as right and proper. In the same way the reluctance to receive charity disappears, to the detriment of the family's self-respect; how much the casual labourer class receives in alms of various kinds cannot be ascertained, but it must amount in all to a very large sum.[1]

A surprising number of men at the docks do not earn on an average ten shillings a week, and there are many who are fortunate if they get as much as a day a week. Men of this class are often able to say how much they have earned because the stamps on their insurance cards serve as guides to their memories. Here, for

[1] In one case which came under my close observation a docker received from two religious bodies with which he was connected £4 5s. in various small sums spread over a twelve-month. This man was not incapable or lazy; on the contrary he was a reliable man, and was always employed by his firm when they had a ship in. In between times he tried for work elsewhere, and I have frequently seen him pushing in the crowds. When the war made employment more plentiful he promptly took advantage of it and worked six days a week. These grants of money were absolutely necessary if he and his family were not to go short of food. They served in short to keep the man fit to do his work whenever the shipping company should be pleased to call upon him for his services. —H. A. M.

instance, is the record for eleven weeks in the summer of 1913 of a man well known to the writer, and whose word he has no reason to doubt :

1st week.	2nd week.	3rd week.	4th week.	5th week.
nil.	day.	nil.	day & half.	nil.
6th week.	7th week.	8th week.	9th week.	10th week.
nil.	nil.	half-day.	nil.	nil.
		11th week.		
		half-day.		

Earnings for eleven weeks, £1 1s. 8d. less insurance contributions, 1s. 4d. ; total, £1 0s. 4d.

Another man about the same time showed his insurance card and said it represented :

1st week.	2nd week.	3rd week.	4th week.	5th week.
nil.	day.	day.	half-day.	half-day.
	6th week.	7th week.	8th week.	
	nil.	half-day.	nil.	

Men of this kind are parasitic ; they cannot keep themselves on their earnings. They will sleep in subsidized lodging-houses or labour shelters ; or if they live at home the earnings of wives and children are the staple incomes, and anything the men may bring home is looked upon as a welcome extra. A docker of this class lamented to a friend of the writer that he was handicapped by not having a wife. " She would be a poor sort of woman if she could not earn enough to keep us both." Few men would express themselves as frankly as this, but it represents a common trend of thought and of life.

Needless to say the lives of these dockers are miserable in the extreme. There are few more depressing sights than the kitchen of a common lodging-house with its spiritless men who have for the most part acquiesced in their fate and have ceased to make a struggle for anything better. Many of these men are quite incapable of steady, sustained work. They are fast becoming unemployables if they are not already so. It is difficult to draw the line at this end of the scale between the casual labourer and the loafer; the one passes insensibly into the other. It is one of the many humiliations of the decent dock labourer that he is compelled to associate with, and to be classed with, men who, either through their own shortcomings or the shortcomings of society, have ceased to be genuine workers and have become cadgers and wasters. These hangers-on of the docks do little good to themselves and do an infinite deal to degrade dock labour as an occupation and to spoil it for better men.

Where a number of men live continually on the threshold of destitution any unusual depression of trade is sure to result in severe distress. Large relief funds were collected in several of the worst winters of the past years, but unless

they are carefully administered such funds do more harm than good. In 1860–1 magistrates in the City and East End distributed doles of money to applicants for help ; there was neither time nor machinery for inquiring into the circumstances, and the magistrates were in effect additional relieving officers without either the rules or the experience which guide those public officials. In 1885-6 nearly £80,000 was raised by a Mansion House Fund and there was a perfect orgy of relief in East and South London. The crudest methods of assistance still linger in our midst, although they are largely discredited by a sounder public opinion. It is very regrettable that newspapers are still offenders, and in some cases appear to regard a period of exceptional distress as an excellent opportunity for advertisement. During the Dock Strike of 1912—the memory of which is a nightmare to all who, like the writer, had to witness the appalling suffering—one of the sensational weekly newspapers sent carts down to the East End, and loaves of bread were thrown into the road for men and women to scramble for. This degrading and disgusting procedure was so strongly resented by the people of the neighbourhood that it had to be abandoned after the

second occasion. It is only fair to say that the funds raised by the more responsible organs have usually been administered of late years with some care and after consultation with experienced workers in the distressed areas. But at its best charity can only be a dangerous palliative. It is so difficult to devise methods of assistance which will not humiliate and demoralise the self-respecting men on the one hand, whilst on the other hand they attract to the neighbourhood an undesirable class who are likely to remain and to be a permanent addition to its burden. In any case it is very difficult to ascertain the real circumstances of a man who describes himself as a casual labourer; his story cannot be checked, there is no employer to write to, and it is hard to tell whether he has made a serious attempt to obtain work or not. But so long as casual labour remains in its present chaotic condition it is perfectly certain that charitable funds, ordinary and extraordinary, will be raised and expended. It is equally certain that much time and money will be given for very small results.

At the close of the Boer War there was a period of exceptional unemployment; trade was slack and the large number of men returning from

South Africa glutted the labour market. Distress was evident and the public felt as usual that "something ought to be done." Another Mansion House Fund was set on foot, and in the winters of 1903–4 and 1904–5 some £50,000 was collected and spent. But those responsible for the fund were anxious to avoid any repetition of the mistakes of the past. Since indiscriminate relief was recognised to be bad, and elaborate inquiry was out of the question, a test was sought by which the willing man might be distinguished from the mere loafer. "Curse your charity; it's work we want!" had been the cry of the unemployed, and they were now to be taken at their word. Work was accordingly provided for them, and in most cases it took the form of digging, an occupation requiring no great skill, and, therefore, conceived to be a convenient common test for men from a great variety of occupations. And so that men might have every inducement to return to their normal trades as soon as possible, the rate was to be distinctly below the ordinary rate for such work. This method was endorsed and taken over by the Government under the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905, since which time public funds

have been provided, and the administration has fallen upon Distress Committees appointed by the Borough Councils and Boards of Guardians jointly. From their inception the Distress Committees have found themselves very largely occupied with the casual labourer. To what an extent this has been so in West Ham is shown by the following table, from which it will be seen that roughly one half of the applicants have been unskilled casual labourers ; and we may be sure, although detailed figures are not given, that dock labourers have formed a very considerable proportion of them. The new method was a distinct advance on the wholesale largess of the past. Several neighbourhoods in London and Greater London are better off to-day for playing fields which were levelled and ponds which were dug by "unemployed" labour. But the old difficulty was still found ; the method did not help the best of those for whom it was intended. The better class artisan shrank from the ordeal of registration, and from contact with the miscellaneous herd of out-of-works ; and the unemployed clerk or shop assistant found the unaccustomed physical labour a real hardship. On the other hand the bricklayer or the general labourer

TABLE II.

WEST HAM DISTRESS COMMITTEE: CLASSIFICATION OF APPLICANTS.

	1905–6	1906–7	1907–8	1908–9	1909–10	1910–11	1911–12	1912–13	1913–14	Average 1905–14	Percentage of total applicants
Class I.—The Regular Artisan	53	58	57	74	81	31	38	15	2	46	1·2
Class II.—The Irregular Artisan and Regular Labourer ...	764	788	848	1,007	988	598	494	563	190	693	18·2
Class III.—Casual Labourers ...	**1,995**	**2,344**	**2,074**	**2,579**	**2,464**	**1,650**	**1,220**	**1,632**	**1,044**	**1,889**	**49·6**
Class IV.—The Physically and Mentally Incapables and Bad Characters ...	703	427	311	218	76	43	31	25	38	208	5·4
Unclassed	981	1,208	906	842	536	406	349	358	174	640	16·8
Not Investigated ...	289	—	7	409	547	362	585	571	255	336	8·8
Total ...	4,785	4,825	4,203	5,129	4,692	3,090	2,717	3,164	1,703	3,812	100.0

could easily perform a task which would pass muster. No proper standard of effort could be set up since the capacities of the men were so different and so imperfectly known. The knowledge that the work had been made for them and that its utility was a secondary consideration seemed to have a damping effect upon even the willing. Very reluctantly public authorities have been forced to realise that relief work is usually neither sound relief nor good work.

As an alternative to local provided work men have been sent for periods in no case exceeding sixteen weeks to farm colonies. The London County Council, for instance, has a farm colony at Hollesley Bay ; the Poplar Board of Guardians at Laindon, and the West Ham Distress Committee at South Ockendon. The men are given training in farm work, and are allowed pocket money ; maintenance is paid to their wives, who remain in London. Again as a method of relief the stay at the farm colony is infinitely preferable to the distribution of doles, but it is expensive and it does little to advance the solution of the unemployment problem beyond supplying data for its intelligent study. A few men are emigrated ; the others after three months at the

farm colony are thrown back into the industrial welter, better in every way, no doubt, for their stay, but very likely to drift back into their former condition. A notable feature of the registration figures of the Distress Committees is the proportion of men who return year after year for assistance. The Distress Committee is regarded by many as another occasional employer.[1]

TABLE III.

West Ham Distress Committee: Comparison of New and Re-registered Applicants.

	1913–4.
New Applicants	579
Re-registered applicants who had—	
(i.) Previously registered every season	118
(ii.) ,, ,, in 7 seasons	91
(iii.) ,, ,, ,, 6 seasons	103
(iv.) ,, ,, ,, 5 seasons	123
(v.) ,, ,, ,, 4 seasons	122
(vi.) ,, ,, ,, 3 seasons	151
(vii.) ,, ,, ,, 2 seasons	152
(viii.) ,, ,, ,, 1 season	264
	1,703

Distress Committee operations are expensive. Provision of work and the maintenance of the Ockendon farm colony have cost West Ham well over £100,000 during the period 1905–1914. £30,000 of this has fallen upon the rates of West Ham; another £70,000 has come from Government grants; and in addition there have been

[1] Cf. the evidence of Miss M. E. Marshall before the Poor Law Commission of 1909. App. Vol. VIII., p. 213.

considerable sums from private funds. It is not possible to distinguish how much of these sums has gone to the partial maintenance of casual labourers, but obviously they are a very expensive class to the districts in which they dwell and to the community generally.

The figures as to the feeding of school children in West Ham afford unequivocal evidence of the same fact. The Education (Provision of Meals) Act of 1906 gave permission to local authorities to spend from the rates not exceeding a halfpenny in the pound in order to provide meals for necessitous children. Voluntary subscriptions for this purpose were still appealed for, but the amount so raised naturally dwindled when the public realised that the local authority had power to raise the money out of rates. The amount spent by the West Ham Education Committee increased from an initial grant of £237 7s. 6d. in 1907-8 to £4,244 8s. 6d. in 1913-4. Since 1909 statistics have been published annually of the occupations of the parents of children fed.

It will be seen from Table IV. how heavily the shipping trade is indebted to the local authority, whilst Table V. shows that of those in the shipping trade whose children are fed at

TABLE IV.

EDUCATION (PROVISION OF MEALS) ACT, 1906.

Summary showing the number of Applicants and the total number of individual children dealt with by the West Ham Education Committee.

	1909–10		1910–11		1911–12		1912–13*		1913–14	
	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.
Building Trade	352	1,024	254	739	277	790	310	854	283	805
Shipping Trade	**485**	**1,439**	**365**	**1,067**	**544**	**1,614**	**1,279**	**3,483**	**821**	**2,279**
Ship-Building Trade ...	135	374	71	195	85	232	325	869	288	825
Factories and Foundries ...	180	498	147	400	113	327				
Miscellaneous (including occupations of widows)	370	994	288	776	399	1,056	363	92	304	758
Total	1,522	4,329	1,125	3,177	1,418	4,019	2,277	6,126	1,696	4,667

* Exclusive of the period of the dock strike.

TABLE V.

EDUCATION (PROVISION OF MEALS) ACT, 1906.

OCCUPATIONS OF APPLICANTS ENGAGED IN THE SHIPPING TRADE.

West Ham.

	1909–10.		1910–11.		1911–12.		1912–13.*		1913–14.	
	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.	No. of Applicants.	No. of Children.
Boiler Scrapers	15	40	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Coal Porters ...	34	100	18	56	49	148	46	126	29	90
Dock Labourers	**296**	**871**	**262**	**767**	**406**	**1,202**	**1,002**	**2,747**	**597**	**1,630**
Firemen ...	54	157	11	30	20	54	41	107	45	128
Lightermen ...	12	40	7	17	4	12	12	35	8	24
Sailors	14	48	16	41	19	49	43	106	41	105
Ship Painters...	—	—	4	7	2	7	21	53	3	11
Stevedores ...	22	69	10	36	11	39	43	118	41	116
Stewards ...	—	—	3	6	2	9	—	—	13	40
Tally Clerks ...	3	14	4	12	5	18	10	29	11	31
Timber Porters	10	28	6	20	2	8	6	16	3	12
Waterside Labourers ...	11	31	7	22	11	29	31	85	24	73
Miscellaneous	14	41	17	53	13	39	24	61	6	19
Total	**485**	**1,439**	**365**	**1,067**	**544**	**1,614**	**1,279**	**3,483**	**821**	**2,279**

* Exclusive of the period of the dock strike.

school the overwhelming majority are dock labourers. Men possessed of special skill, as the stevedores are, and men who, like the coal-porters, need exceptional strength, do not figure to anything like the same extent in the lists. There was a dock strike in 1911 and another in 1912, and the figures for 1911-2 and 1912–3 are, therefore, in some degree vitiated, but 1909 and 1910 were normal years, and in 1909-10 and 1910-11 as in all the other years the dock labourers easily head the list. According to the census of 1911 the dock labourers in West Ham numbered roughly eight per cent. of the adult occupied males of the borough, and in 1910-11 we find that dock labourers number 262 or roughly 23 per cent. of the applicants to have their children fed at school. Too much stress must not be laid upon these percentages, because it is fairly certain that a good many men who return themselves as dock labourers both in the census and to the Distress Committee have really very slight connection with the docks. But when every possible allowance is made for inaccuracies in the figures it remains evident that the children of dockers come to a considerable extent upon the rates, and far more than the children of most kinds of workers.

One more statistical table may be allowed. It shows the condition of the dock labourers in West Ham in respect to housing. On p. 254 of Howarth and Wilson's "West Ham" particulars are given of the number of rooms occupied by dockers and their families. For the sake of comparison we place beside them the figures of all classes in the borough, taken from the census return of 1901.

TABLE VI.

WEST HAM: HOUSING CONDITIONS.

LIVING.	Dock Labourers and their Families.		All Classes.	
	Number of Persons.	Per-centage.	Number of Persons.	Per-centage.
3 or more to a Room ...	1,433	7·53	7,430	2·78
2 and under 3 to a Room ...	5,124	26·91	37,248	13·93
1 and under 2 to a Room ...	6,381	33·52	70,786	26·48
Less than 1 to a Room ...	898	4·72	14,657	5·48
In more than 4 Rooms ...	5,201	27·32	137,237	51·33
Total ...	19,037	100·00	267,358	100·00

It will be seen that over a third of the dockers and their families live two or more to a room. To read the figures aright and to let them speak to our imaginations we must form some idea of

the kind of rooms in which these families live. Over large areas of the borough, in the Tidal Basin Ward, for instance, in which over a quarter of them dwell, few rooms measure more than twelve feet in length or breadth, whilst eight feet is a very usual height. It is in rooms of these dimensions that they are crammed, two, three and more to the room. It is after a night spent in their stuffy atmosphere that a man goes to the docks to look for work. The bad housing of the docker is at once an effect of the miserable conditions of his occupation, and a potent destroyer of the energy which might lift him out of them.

People sometimes express surprise that men do not make more effort to escape from a district in which they fare so badly. But the difficulties in the way of such a course are many. They are unwilling to give up their chance, such as it is, of work at the docks; and if they went away they would lose touch with the foremen. They do not want their wives and children to give up the employment from which a considerable part of the family income is derived. They do not want to leave a district in which they are known, and in which they have friends, to live amongst strangers who would not be so likely to help them

over a bad time. To make a move requires a certain amount of money, and the poorer casual has not got it. And it requires a certain amount of confidence, and that is just what his mode of life robs him of. An intelligent working man to whom the writer put the question, why men stayed in a district where work was scarce, gave as the reason after a moment's thought, " Lowness of spirits." It is notorious that nothing breaks a man's spirit more than an unsuccessful search for work. To have to stand in a crowd morning after morning, and to be picked by a foreman as a prelude to an odd day's work is destructive of self-respect. And when a man's self-respect is gone he is not capable of much. So he stays on, likely to become more and more demoralised, and to be pushed aside more frequently by the constant stream of newcomers who in their turn will succumb to the blighting atmosphere of the docks.

CHAPTER IV

HOW DOCK LABOUR IS RECRUITED

ANYONE who has seen the pushing crowds at one of the big calls in the docks, who has marked the many waiting groups at wharves and warehouses, or who has had thrust upon his attention time after time in some piece of social work he has attempted the inherent evils of casual labour, must have asked himself sometimes where the supply of men comes from, and what can attract so many to an occupation which is obviously precarious and already badly overstocked.

The answer in its main outlines is, of course, fairly well-known. Most casual labourers have been in some previous occupation. The crowd of men competing for work morning after morning is the detritus of the industrial world. Some are victims of industrial misfortune; a bankruptcy, or the death of an industry, or a season of exceptional depression in their own trade, has driven

them to the docks. Some are a little flawed, physically or morally ; they are the throw-outs of other trades. Boys from blind-alley occupations drift there in considerable numbers ; and ex-army men are fairly common. Once in the docks it is not easy to get away again. Men cannot estimate their chances in the daily lottery, and so they hang on, hoping that the future will be better than the past. Last week was bad, and the week before, but next week may be good again, who knows ? Characters are not usually asked or given ; this makes it easy for any one to come ; but on the other hand, it may make it very difficult to get back into permanent work. Besides, a man will very soon deteriorate, even if he does not become demoralised. Men who have been a few months at the docks find it hard to get back to their own trades.

So much is common knowledge. But more detailed information as to the sources of supply, and of the proportions they bear to one another, is much to be desired and is not easily obtainable. It should be possible, however, to indicate some of the principal rivulets which unite to make the great stream of fresh labour which is constantly pouring into the docks and wharves.

A large number of men come to the docks with some kind of introduction or recommendation. As a docker put it : " They know the foreman's brother-in-law." Foremen are said to be overwhelmed with letters and personal applications. But a man may get a start simply by presenting himself at a call. The same docker explained the process as follows : " You stand in the crowd on a very busy day. When the foreman has taken on all the men he knows he will say : ' Do you want a job ? Can you do this kind of work ? ' And of course you say ' Yes,' whether you can or you can't." But a man may stand in the crowd a good many mornings to no purpose, and the great majority of those who obtain work are " spoken for."

Dock work requires a fair amount of physical strength and endurance and few of the dockers are under 17.[1] Occasionally a well-made lad of 16 or even 15 will get work, but in the main it is not an occupation for boys. Many lads enter the docks between the ages of 17 and 20. Quite a number of these will have deliberately chosen

[1] Census of 1911, Dock and Wharf Labourers :—

	England & Wales.	*London.*	*West Ham.*
All ages	... 99,464	... 19,504	... 6,173
Under 17 ...	... 915	... 80	... 36

docking as their occupation. A social worker in Wapping tells me that many of the boys in that district intend to go to the docks when they are old enough. They take the best paid job that offers in the meantime, and when they arrive at 18 or thereabouts they apply for a rise very much as a matter of form and fully expecting a refusal. Thereupon they take to the docks. Their fathers were dockers before them, and they soon get to know the ropes. A young man of good physique can get a sufficiency of work, and he is soon in the swim. Altogether this method of recruitment is not unsatisfactory, and if the vacancies in the dockers' ranks were filled mainly in this way there would not be much cause for complaint. There would be much to say about the manner in which the years of adolescence were spent, but that is part of the general problem of boy labour and not specifically of dock labour. One could wish many alterations in the conditions of the occupation which they enter, and the boys might well be warned against its peculiar temptations and hardships. But the method of entry to the occupation may be taken as normal; docking is entered so far as these lads are concerned much

as the building trade is entered, or any other occupation which can only utilise adult labour.

But a far greater number of boys drift into the docks without any such prevision. The boy does not think of the future when the school-leaving age comes, nor do his parents. He takes the first job that offers, yielding perhaps fairly good boy's wages, but leading to nothing further. Somewhere about eighteen he grows dissatisfied and demands a man's wage: the man's wage is not forthcoming, and accordingly he throws up his job and drifts, disappointed and resentful, to the docks.

This of course is the well known case of the blind-alley boy, and it has attracted a good deal of attention. But again it forms a small proportion only of the total of boy labour which will go to swell the ranks of casual labour at manhood. There is a good deal of misconception about blind-alley occupations. People usually think of a boy working for a firm for years in some such capacity as messenger or van-boy and then being dismissed on arriving at manhood. And that is a common and serious evil. But far more common and far more serious is a frequent change of

occupation during boyhood.[1] Boys are in and out of jobs; they give notice lightly (or leave without notice) and employers dismiss them lightly. Boys of fourteen and fifteen find their own jobs and throw them up as they think fit. One job will be too greasy and another too hot; at another place they will sauce the foreman and get the sack. It is not a rare thing for a boy to have a dozen different jobs within a couple of years of leaving school.[2] Firms which have occasional well-paid work (e.g. rubber works, sugar refineries) act as a disturbing influence; boys will sometimes throw up jobs which might

[1] Here, for instance, are the records of three West Ham boys.

B., age 14½; Glass blower's; wire rope works; wire rope works; mat and sack factory.

G., age 15½; Barber's latherer; milkman's boy; saw mills; laundry; custard factory; printing works.

H., age 16; Wire rope works; biscuit factory; van boy; saw mills; saw mills; saw mills; cake works; saw mills.

[2] The industrial record of W. B. may be tabulated as follows:—

5 months at 6s. per week and overtime (discharged on account of slackness).
5 months unemployed.
4 months at 12s. per week and overtime. (Firm then slack and lad discharged.)
2 months unemployed.
2 months at 12s. per week and overtime. (Firm slack, and lad discharged.)
3 weeks unemployed.
1 month at 12s. per week and overtime. (Firm again slack.)
4 months unemployed.
1 month at 12s. per week and overtime. (Firm again slack.)
5 months unemployed.
2 months at 30s. per week.

—"Mansfield House Magazine," January, 1914.

lead to a permanency in order to get a few weeks at a higher rate of pay. They grow up accustomed to intermittent engagements with intervals of idleness and thus glide imperceptibly into the habits of the casual labourer.

So much for the boys who take to the docks on approaching manhood, from whatever motive or compulsion of circumstance. Still we have considered a minority only of those who find a living there. A very large number drift in at later ages. There are actually more dockers between the ages of 35 and 45 than between the ages of 25 and 35. Thus in the census of 1911 there were enumerated in England and Wales 28,170 dock and wharf labourers between the ages of 35 and 45 as against 25,926 between the ages of 25 and 35. Obviously there has been a large influx, for in a normal occupation we find (as we should expect) fewer men at the higher ages. The influx is even more obvious when we compare these 28,170 dock and wharf labourers who were between the ages of 35 and 45 in 1911 and the 23,429 dock and wharf labourers who were between the ages of 25 and 35 in 1901. The survivors of this latter group have been heavily reinforced during the intervening ten years, for otherwise the number would have dim-

inished instead of increasing as it has done. And indeed there is a drift into the docks at all ages.[1]

There will be sailors who have tired of the sea, or who wish to settle on land to be near their families, and since they are familiar with ships and cargoes and proverbially " handy " they are likely to make good dockers.

A large number more will be ex-army men, for the army is a huge blind alley occupation and the time-expired man is at a loose end :

" A man o' four-an'-twenty that 'asn't learned a trade
Besides ' Reserve ' agin' him—'e'd better be never made "

says Mr. Kipling. There are men, not a few, in the trenches to-day who had been picking up a scanty living in the docks or at the wharves since last they fought for their country in the Boer war. Many of these men had been blind-alley boys or boys of changing occupation before they enlisted, and their time in the army merely staved off recourse to casual labour.[2] Unemployment is the recruiting sergeant's most powerful ally. And unfortunately life in the army does not improve a man. " A

[1] See W. H. Beveridge's " Unemployment," p. 129, for a graphic representation of this fact, and an article on " Underemployment and the Mobility of Labour," by J. St. G. Heath, in the *Economic Journal* for June, 1911.

[2] " Our Army is recruited to a large extent from the industrial failures." (Poor Law Commission Report, 1909, Appendix, Vol. XX., p. 32. Cd. 4632.)

month's furlough in the year and half holiday most days in the week are thoroughly demoralcising and calulated to destroy all aptitude for regular work. Consequently, it is the general impression and it is largely true, that reservists are not to be depended upon for real hard, steady work, and employers look askance at them." [1] Reservists are frequently to be found living in lodging-houses. Their reservists' pay ensures their night's shelter, and a little intermittent work suffices for the low standard of living with which in many cases they appear to be content.

Consider the conditions which make it specially easy to become a docker. In the first place little or no preliminary knowledge is necessary, for the rougher kinds of work at least. There is knack, of course, as in all occupations, and custom makes the work lighter and makes a more capable worker. The docker quite properly resents the term " unskilled labour " ; no labour is entirely unskilled and some branches of docking demand a good deal of knowledge of marks of goods and methods of storage. But the kind of job which is given to a new-comer, wheeling a truck for instance, can soon be learned and does not

[1] *Ibid.*

require great strength or skill. Nor is good character required. At the docks, except for the small nuclei of permanent men, references are neither asked nor given.

Accordingly, as might be expected, there is a sprinkling of bad characters, men who had good reasons for escaping from their previous surroundings, and whose records would bar them from any occupation in which employers were particular about antecedents. And that popular figure of the picturesque journalist, the professional man who has come down through drink, is certainly to be found. Most dockers can tell stories of some broken-down doctor or parson who has worked alongside of them. But these men form a very small percentage of the whole.[1] The weaknesses or misfortunes of average men, far more than crime or conspicuous debauchery, recruit the docks.

Bankruptcies are always occurring; employers retire from business; new machinery is continually displacing men; all these add their quota to glut the already abnormally crowded labour market.

Trade booms and trade depressions recur in cycles, and every trade depression hurries along

[1] Decayed professional men are more frequently to be found among the tally clerks, whose work is not manual.

a fresh wave of men to the docks. When the furniture trade is slack, as for instance during the war, cabinet-makers come down to the docks. When the building trade is idle, as for instance during the strike of 1914, joiners and others take to the docks. French polishers displaced by woman labour become dockers. When Woolwich Arsenal discharges men, the free ferry brings them over to the Victoria and Albert Docks. When there is little doing at the cement works on the Medway, men pour into Tilbury. The docks are the stand-by of all the unfortunates of industry. Seasonal workers turn to them in their off time. When trade becomes brisk again many will be re-absorbed, but some will remain. And a very large number of men have done a few days' work at the docks at some time or other. A labourer will tell you as if it were something unusual that he has " only done a few days at the docks " or that he has " done scarcely any docking to speak of."

The docker's lot is therefore peculiarly hard. When bad times come he is twice hit ; he suffers not only the direct consequences of a reduced volume of goods to handle, but he is further affected by the depression in other trades. With

less work there will be more men to share it. As if his livelihood were not precarious enough already by reason of fogs and tides and the incidents peculiar to shipping, he is further liable at any time to have to share this livelihood with a host of new-comers. Because the factories are closing down, the docker must buckle his belt a little tighter; because the skilled trades are discharging hands, the docker's family must go a little short. Some part of the relief of unemployment must come out of his earnings. Room must be found for the ejected of other trades in the occupation which of all occupations has the biggest permanent surplus.

There is an obvious injustice here; the unemployed should be provided for indeed, but not at the docker's expense; it is not fair that he should bear the extra burden. There is a clear case for control of the influx into the docks and wharves. The members of some trades are safeguarded by the possession of peculiar skill. It is not so with the docker. In other trades a powerful union prevents swamping. The Dockers' Union is not strong enough to do so, and it is scarcely likely to be; the difficulties of organising these ever-changing crowds of casual workers, many

of them too poor to pay even a small subscription, are enormous. External interference is needed. Of that there will be more to say when we come to consider remedies.

Specially obnoxious to the docker is the "recommended" man, that is to say the man who comes down with a note from a previous employer or perhaps from some well-meaning clergyman who does not realise that any work his *protégé* may get will be at the expense of another man. For this is emphatically the case at the docks. There are times and occupations where a recommendation has its use; it puts employer and employee in touch with one another; it does in a clumsy and informal way what the labour exchanges are trying to do scientifically. But where there is a perpetual glut of men as at the docks the new man's gain is exactly some old man's loss. To send a man to the docks with a recommendation is a doubtful kindness to him and a certain injustice to the dockers already there.

When trade is slack employers quite naturally keep on their best men and dismiss first those who are inclined to drink or to shirk or who are under par in some respect. Employers, it is true, may

dismiss also those who are not sufficiently servile, who obtrude their politics or their trade unionism; and personal connections and all sorts of preferences will play their part in deciding who is to go and who is to stay. But it is safe to assume that amongst those who are thrown out of work there will be a large proportion of the inferior men.[1] These men—just those who most need the discipline of regular hours and proper supervision—are subjected to all the irregularities of a casual labourer's life. They are compelled by the conditions of their new occupation to be loafers, often for many hours in the day; they are often cold, disappointed, depressed; at other times they work furiously for as much as twenty-four hours at a stretch. If they have a weakness for alcohol there is every excuse for taking a glass, the weather, fatigue, the need of keeping in touch with their work, all combine to make the temptation almost irresistible. The heavy drinker finds that two or three days' absence on a drinking bout does not appreciably diminish his chances of employment. The man who is inclined to drink will go downhill very fast at the docks.

[1] Their inferiority, it should be noted, selects them for unemployment, but it is not the cause of the unemployment. The trade depression causes that; some one has to go; industrial quality merely decides who it shall be.

And the irresolute man has little to strengthen him in his search for work. It is all so haphazard. Nor has he the sharp goad of actual destitution. He will probably get a little work and earn a little money. Soon he becomes purposeless; he grows accustomed to occasional earnings; he accepts a low standard of life; by-and-by he will not want regular work and would not accept it if it came his way. The unemployed man tends to become unemployable.

But besides the pressure of need which drives men to the docks there is also a positive lure which accounts for many recruits. The hourly rate for dock labour is a high one as compared with that paid for other classes of low-skilled labour. Eightpence an hour sounds magnificent to the man who is getting twenty-five shillings a week in some permanent job. What he fails to recognise is that for each hour's work at eightpence there is an indefinite amount of waiting for which nothing is paid. Those weary mornings when a man hangs about from seven till eight and from eight till nine, and then kills time from nine till one, are not paid for. They are necessary to his occupation; if he does not turn up at the calls he may lose his chance, or his foreman

may "drill" him and let him "stand on the stones" later on when there is work. So that when the hours of waiting are added to the hours he is actually at work the rate is not eightpence, but more like fourpence or threepence. Mr. Beveridge has pointed out—and it cannot be too much emphasised—that casual labour is a subtle form of sweating.

A man will hear of big money to be earned at the docks at a time when trade is abnormally brisk, or during a shortage of labour,[1] and he throws up his job to share in it. Later on, when he is no longer young and strong, or when the docks are slack again, or when the life of the docks has demoralised him and made him a less eligible worker, he regrets it. He still gets his eightpence an hour for day-work and his shilling an hour for overtime, but the intervals of unemployment are longer, and when he thinks how little his money comes to he wishes himself back on the old small but regular wage.

The docks have a further attraction for a good many men; they offer a certain amount of freedom. A man can take a day off now and then; in fact he is sure of a day off now and then.

[1] Every strike brings in a number of new men. Many of the strikers of 1911 and 1912 were blacklegs in 1889.

It is not a six days a week business. And as long as he can earn a sufficiency of money on the other days, and especially if he can get occasional heavy overtime, he likes the comparative liberty. A middle-aged docker told me that he came up to London originally to be a coachman and gardener, but that he met a man he knew who said to him, " Don't tie yourself up : come down to the docks and earn plenty of money and have a free life."

That was in the days when the country labourers were pouring into the docks. Another man was a ploughman in Essex. From time to time rumours reached him of the big money to be earned in the towns. It was a little thing which finally decided him to go. He was proud of his horses, and when they took away the off horse and gave him an old stiff animal instead, he lost interest in his work. The call of the town was loud in his ears, and on a fateful morning he threw up his job and went to look for work in the docks. That was nearly thirty years ago. In 1913 he was getting on an average two days' work a week, and the marks of want were very visible in his home.

Countrymen still come to the docks but not in such large numbers ; the competition of a second

and third generation of town-bred casuals is too fierce. There is still a trickle of countrymen to the docks, but it is usually through some other town occupation, often that of carman, and it does not bulk largely in the total supply of dock labour.

In the winter of 1914 there was great congestion in the docks at London and elsewhere. Recruiting and the calling up of reservists had drained the labour market to an unprecedented degree. Many of the most capable dockers and stevedores had gone abroad on Army Service Corps work. Those who remained were earning very good money. Owing to the lack of organisation at the docks there were a good many local shortages of labour. Employers complained that they could not get enough men, although as a matter of fact there were plenty of men available if only demand and supply had been properly correlated. Exaggerated reports appeared in the press as to the earnings of dockers—£5 a week was freely mentioned. These misleading statements attracted a good deal of fresh labour to the docks, and many men who had come in on the expectation of high earnings were bitterly disillusioned.

W. was a fitter's assistant at Paddington ; his wages were 25s. 6d. a week ; he spent 2s. 3d. weekly in fares. He heard of the good money at the docks and threw up his job. He attended a good many calls without success, and used to come home dead tired and with his clothes all pulled about. He told me that he stood beneath the platform one morning, and the foreman gave out tallies over his head. "I felt very bad, but I thought of the soldiers going off from Paddington singing 'Are we downhearted?' and the others replying 'No,' and I made up my mind not to be discouraged." Ultimately he got a start ; he had worked in the Thames Ironworks, Limited,[1] years ago, and he found many of his old mates in the docks, and one of them spoke for him. "I might have stood in the crowd until I was grey-headed unless some one had spoken for me." W., with his excellent character and steady habits, will probably make his way in the docks, but many men of less strength of will would have succumbed in the circumstances.

In good times, therefore, as in bad times, men are attracted to the docks to swell the surplus

[1] The decay and final closing of the Thames Ironworks, Limited, at which as late as 1910 a cruiser was built, threw out of work a large number of skilled mechanics, many of whom drifted into dock labour.

there. How large that surplus is we do not know. At Liverpool statistics were collected during the month of January, 1912, and on the busiest day of that very busy month there were 7,000 men unemployed. It is probable that the figure would be considerably higher at London. We may safely assume that on an average morning at least 10,000 men seek for work at the docks in London and do not find it.

CHAPTER V

PAST ATTEMPTS AT REFORM

THE docker has long been the stock example of the casual labourer and the story of his hard lot is no new one. As long ago as 1887 Mrs. Sidney Webb (then Miss Beatrice Potter) described the daily struggle for work at the London Docks,[1] and similar accounts are to be found even earlier.[2] There is copious evidence on dock labour in the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour of 1891. "The Story of the Dockers' Strike," by H. Llewellyn Smith and Vaughan Nash, recounts the grievances which led to the memorable conflict in which John Burns and Ben Tillett led the men to victory. And there have been many descriptions since, all agreeing in their main outlines and in their condemnation of the methods of riverside engagement.

[1] *Nineteenth Century*, September, 1887. Reprinted in Booth's "Life and Labour of the People." Vol. IV.

[2] E.g., Mayhew's "London Labour and the London Poor," 1861.

To those of us who belong to a younger generation these records of twenty-five years ago are rather sad reading. So much seems unchanged. So many of the descriptions might have been written to-day. We read that the men's clothing was bad, and that their boots were often unfit for the work they had to do. That is still true; it is one of the first things one notices about the crowds at the morning calls. There were complaints of bribery in 1889; it was said that if you did not treat your foreman you would very likely lose your chance of a job. We hear the same charges. Men complained in 1889 that foremen saved dinner-hour pay by dismissing their gangs at twelve o'clock and taking them on again at one o'clock. This is a common complaint to-day. We read of fights among the unhappy men who competed for work. Still true. Indeed as one reads the indictment brought against the system of dock labour twenty-five years ago one realises sadly that most of it stands to-day. And in 1889 it was already hackneyed.

And yet there has been progress. The great dock strike of 1889 achieved results of permanent value to the docker. There have been longer disputes since, but none that have impressed the

public imagination as this one did. It was a revelation of unsuspected qualities; the world was astonished by the solidarity, obstinacy, and power of combination displayed by a class of men who were previously supposed to be incapable of helping themselves. From the time of the first procession through the city on Monday, August 19, to the close of the strike on Saturday, September 14, the struggle was followed with the keenest interest not only by the people of London but by the whole world. Public opinion, for the most part and with some fluctuations, was on the side of the men. More than £13,000 was subscribed in England, apart from trade union grants; Cardinal Manning and other dignitaries brought pressure to bear upon the directors; contributions arrived from the Continent and from the United States, whilst from the Colonies remittances were sent amounting to no less than £30,000. The practical sympathy of Australia turned the scale and did more than anything else to ensure the success of the strike. The men won the bulk of their demands; the docker got his "tanner" an hour; four hours was to be the minimum period of engagement; and overtime was discouraged by a heavier rate of pay.

The Dock Strike was felt by many to be the beginning of a new era. The material gains were considerable; the immaterial gains were greater. Until that time trade unionism had been confined almost entirely to the skilled trades. The New Unionism organised those whom we are pleased to call, not altogether accurately, unskilled labourers. The movement spread far beyond London, far beyond the group of trades connected with the waterside. It was aggressive, but it was idealistic. John Burns had preached temperance and self-control during the strike. Ben Tillett had chosen as the motto for the Dockers' Union the lines of Shelley:

> "A Nation
> Made free by love, a mighty brotherhood
> Linked by a jealous interchange of good."

Yet it was obvious to all who watched intelligently and sympathetically that there would be difficult days in front of the men's leaders when there was no longer the excitement of the strike to sustain them, and when the public had lapsed into its usual indifference. Would the Dockers' Union last or would it go to pieces? Would there be continual improvement or a gradual drift back to the old bad conditions? Would the strike of 1889 mark an epoch in the history

of labour, or would it be, like many another famous victory, a barren one ? Time alone could answer these questions.

The Dockers' Union has had bad days since as well as good, its members and its authority have fluctuated, its leadership has often been criticised and not least by the men themselves ; but in its very worst days it has remained the nucleus of an organisation, and the dockers have never again been the undisciplined rabble they were before 1889. The Dockers' Union has voiced many claims, prevented many petty encroachments, called attention to defects of gear and lack of inspection, protested against the bullying of foremen, secured further increases in pay, and in many other ways helped to raise the standard of the docker's life.

But in the matter of casual engagement, which after all is the chief evil of the docker's life, the union has not accomplished a great deal. It has not been able to secure the abolition of the three morning calls at intervals of an hour which necessitate so much mischievous loafing. It has not been strong enough to enforce for any length of time over the whole area of the docks the "ticket," that is to say to insist on only

union men being employed, and consequently it has not been able to check the continual drift of labour to the docks and the maintenance of a huge surplus. Its very successes in obtaining increases in the hourly rate of pay have tended to aggravate the evil. The increase from fivepence in 1872 to sixpence in 1889, sevenpence in 1894 and eightpence in 1911 has meant substantial gain and an improved standard of living to those men who are fairly sure of work, the permanent men and the preference men high up a foreman's list. But to the casual labourer in intermittent employment the changes have been of doubtful advantage. With each increase in the rate of pay the competition for work has increased also. The higher rate attracts men from other occupations and the average of work decreases; the consequence is that a man's earnings may be no more, whilst the demoralising intervals of unemployment are longer and more frequent.

The peculiarly bad position of the docker, even among casual labourers, comes from a union of causes. Shipping is more than most industries affected by weather, and it is dependent upon tides. Hence the demand for labour is uncertain

and fluctuates from day to day. Dock dues are heavy and rapid discharge is very much desired; employers are therefore anxious to have a large supply of labour at hand to meet emergencies,and naturally if they only need a man two days in the week they will not want to pay him for a week's work. Over any large area there will be scores of employers, who are busy two or three days in the week. But they are not all busy at the same time and herein lies the possibility of diminishing the irregularity of work. You may have one man working on Monday and Tuesday for firm A, and then idle all the rest of the week; you may have another man working for firm B on Thursday and Friday and idle all the rest of his week. The key to the problem of casual labour is the gradual substitution of one man working four days a week and earning something like a living wage, for two men working two days a week and half starving.

Let us suppose for the sake of illustration that five shipping firms in one of the docks employ men in a given week as follows:

	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs.	Fri.	Sat.	Total.
Firm A ...	84	108	141	*24*	110	**180**	647
,, B ...	108	115	160	104	**202**	*60*	749
,, C ...	*80*	98	**214**	161	191	108	852
,, D ...	208	*26*	**210**	104	81	68	697
,, E ...	110	**190**	*84*	88	128	90	690
	590	537	**809**	*431*	712	506	3,635

Maxima in black type; minima in italics.

Now let us consider these figures on two different hypotheses :—

(1) That each shipping firm takes on its men entirely without reference to the other firms, that there is no interchange of labour, and that men who work for one firm never work for any other of the firms ; (2) that the five firms act as a single employer in the engagement of labour, that they engage from a common centre from a single supply of labour, and that men move about freely from firm to firm as they are required.

Supposing that all of the firms were desirous of employing as large a permanent staff as possible.

On the first hypothesis of the separate labour markets :

A could give a week's work to				24	and casual work to			156	men.	
B	,,	,,	,,	60	,,	,,	,,	142	,,	
C	,,	,,	,,	80	,,	,,	,,	134	,,	
D	,,	,,	,,	26	,,	,,	,,	184	,,	
E	,,	,,	,,	84	,,	,,	,,	106	,,	
The five firms		,,	,,	274	,,	,,	,,	722	,,	

On the second hypothesis of a single labour market :

The five firms could give a full week's work to 481 men and casual work to 328 men.

Or alternatively the diminution in the casual nature of the work may be tested by seeing how

many days each man would get if the work were evenly distributed.

On the first hypothesis of the separate labour markets:

A	could	give	each	man	on	an	average	3·59	days' work.
B	,,	,,	,,	,,	,,	,,		3·71	,, ,,
C	,,	,,	,,	,,	,,	,,		3·98	,, ,,
D	,,	,,	,,	,,	,,	,,		3·32	,, ,,
E	,,	,,	,,	,,	,,	,,		3·63	,, ,,

On the second hypothesis of a single labour market: The five firms conjointly could give each man on an average 4·49 days' work a week.

There can be no doubt that by organised interchange of labour a number of employers could materially diminish the casual nature of the work.

As a matter of fact, in this case and in most cases the labour of the docks does not strictly conform to either hypothesis. It is neither wholly organised nor wholly unorganised. The labour supplies of the various firms are not entirely distinct, nor are they quite freely interchangeable. There is a flow of labour in the docks but it is not easy, it is viscous rather than mobile. Men pass from one group to another, they may work for one firm on Monday and for another on Wednes-

day. But there are many checks and restrictions. Information is hazy and men waste much time in attending calls where there is no need for them. Many men follow a single firm in the belief that it is better to be well known in one place and fairly sure of some work. The foremen discourage such wandering and may punish it by "drilling." The men themselves have an uneasy feeling that to present themselves in some other part of the docks is to poach on other men's preserves and is akin to blacklegging. Sometimes there are trade union difficulties; one firm only employs union men, another will not recognise the ticket. Sometimes there are two trade unions for the same class of work.[1] There is a good deal of specialisation of work also and this specialisation sets up barriers between different classes of workers; sometimes the barriers are real and irremovable, sometimes they are merely sentimental.

In 1891 an attempt was made by the London and India Docks Company, mainly at the instigation of Mr. Charles Booth, to regu-

[1] E.g. the Amalgamated Stevedores' Society and the London Stevedores' Union. Members of the Gasworkers' Union work in the docks, and there has been a certain amount of friction with the Dockers' Union about recognition of the Gasworkers' ticket.

larise employment. Lists were drawn up of permanent men, registered or "A" men, preference or "B" men, second preference or "C" men. The "C" list was never of much importance and dropped out of use very soon. Strict instructions were given to the superintendents and to the foremen that the "A" list was in all cases to be exhausted before the "B" men were employed, and that outside casuals were not to be taken on at all so long as there were any of the list men about. The element of chance in engagement was thus very much diminished and consequently there was little to induce men far in excess of the maximum requirements to hang about on the chance of an odd day's work. Even more important was the linking up of department with department. Men are now moved about freely from dock to dock. Each superintendent draws up in the afternoon a schedule of his next day's requirements and sends it up to the central office. By this method crowds of casuals competing haphazard for work in scores of places have been replaced by supplies of men directed from a central office to wherever in the docks their services may be required. It was at first intended

that men on the "A" list should be stood off in slack times, but in practice they have been almost continuously employed, and in the matter of regularity their position has been little inferior to that of the permanent men. It has not been so with the "B" men unfortunately, and they may still be seen jostling at the calls just as casuals do elsewhere. The proportion of the Dock Company's work done by men in regular employment (i.e. permanent or "A" men) increased from 16 per cent. in 1887 to more than 78 per cent. in 1904. When the Port of London Authority took over the duties of the dock companies in 1908 it retained the list system, but after the strike of 1912 the bulk of its employees were only received back as "B" men. In 1914, however, the Port Authority formed a new permanent staff of 3,000 men, an increase of some 800 on the number formerly employed, as either permanent men or "A" men, and in 1915 the Port Authority decided upon the appointment of 500 additional permanent labourers "in view of current and future requirements of trade and the satisfactory results which the greater regularisation of employment has produced."[1] The list system initiated in 1891

[1] "Morning Post," May 1, 1915.

may therefore be said to have been successful on the whole ; it tended steadily to increase the proportion of men in regular employment, and it paved the way for the creation of a permanent staff.

Unfortunately the good effects of the efforts made by the London and India Docks Company were to a considerable extent neutralised by the fact that from the very start in 1891 the labour of the port was increasingly passing into other hands. Prior to 1889 the whole of the unloading in the docks was done by the dock companies, but in 1889 the shipping companies, who were in continual conflict with the dock companies on matters of charges, demanded to be allowed to discharge their own ships. The dock strike intervened whilst the demand was under consideration. Labour after the strike was in such a restless condition and the prospect of making a profit on unloading seemed so impaired by the increased rates of pay, that the shipping companies would gladly have allowed their demand to drop. But the dock companies on their part were anxious to be rid of the responsibility and held them to their demand. At the present time the Port Authority's operations are mainly confined to warehousing.

From the point of view of reform this scattering of the control over labour is much to be regretted. Obviously it puts great difficulties in the way of getting anything done. There has been a great variety of practice amongst the various employers; some have lists which are kept to pretty faithfully, in other cases the foremen trust to their memories and take on quite at random. In one or two cases systematic exchanges of labour have been instituted; but in the main, partly through apathy and partly perhaps from genuine perplexity as to the manner in which the problem should be tackled, the shipping companies and other employers of dock labour have done little or nothing to remedy the existing deplorable conditions. They seem to have regarded it as right and inevitable that a large reserve of under-employed labour should be allowed to accumulate in order to meet their widely fluctuating demands.

The change was not made without a certain amount of complaint. The foremen did not like it. They would sooner have taken on "B" men whom they knew than "A" men from another department. Their objections had to be over-ruled. The men themselves did not like

being moved about from place to place, but as the alternative was a reduction of the staff their objections soon disappeared. There was a good deal of grumbling, especially by trade union officials, that the permanent men were "white slaves" always at the beck of the foreman, but the men themselves soon came to value their secure positions. The superintendents declared on the other hand that the men would not work so well now that they were weekly servants. But in 1908 Mr. H. H. Watts, the company's staff inspector, was emphatic that the company had gained by the change :

"My experience is that permanent men are better workers than extra men and casuals. They not only become more familiar with the details of their employment, but as the result of better wages they are better able to perform the manual labour required of them It is said sometimes that after being put on weekly lists men are inclined to relax their efforts, feeling that their livelihood is fairly well assured. But this can always be corrected by weeding out men who do not appreciate the value of their engagements. I contend that, given an equal desire on the part of two men to serve, the man who is

extra and receives casual pay cannot in the nature of things do as well as the man who is permanent and has regular wages." [1]

Mr. Watts went on to say that the necessary stimulus to put forth their best efforts was supplied by the Company's "plus" system (a bonus for quick working).

"The conclusion I arrive at, therefore, is that the incidental expenses connected with a well-managed permanent staff are more than covered by improvement in the quality of the work done, but the extent to which that is so must vary with the circumstances of each case."

Schemes of decasualisation are not popular with the dockers themselves because they fear, not unnaturally, that whilst some will get more work others will get less work or none at all, and they do not want to see men deprived of their livelihood, poor though it may be. There is not so strong an objection to the prevention of fresh entries to the dock, and that is the line which has been taken at Liverpool. There, as at London, the evils of casual labour had been repeatedly described and deplored,[2] but no substantial reform

[1] "C.O.S. Report on Unskilled Labour, 1908," p. 124.
[2] E.g. "How the Casual Labourer Lives." Northern Publishing Company, 1909.

had been effected until the passing of the Insurance Act in 1911. Then Mr. R. Williams, the Divisional Officer for the North-Western Labour Exchanges, pointed out that advantage might be taken of Section 99 of the Act, which allows the Board of Trade to undertake the custody of cards and deduction of insurance contributions on behalf of employers, provided they engage their casual labour in a manner approved by the Labour Exchange. In August of the same year, at the termination of a dock strike, a permanent Joint Committee was established, consisting of five members nominated by the employers and five members nominated by the Dockers' Union; and this Committee, with the assistance of the Labour Exchange officials, proceeded to collect information and to prepare a scheme for the better regulation of labour in the port.

From statistics collected during the month of January, 1912, an exceptionally busy month, it was clear that the excess of men in the docks over the requirements of the employers was never less than 7,000, and was usually a great deal more. With such a large surplus there was clearly no room for newcomers, who could only hope to obtain a living by pushing aside older hands, and

the first step to be taken was to stop the continual drift of fresh hands into the docks. Accordingly in July, 1912, every docker in Liverpool was registered and given a tally, and it was agreed that for the future no one should be employed without a tally. The docks were divided into six areas, and in each of them a Joint Committee was formed, on which, as on the original Joint Committee, employers and men were equally represented, and to these Committees is entrusted the duty of issuing fresh tallies. The intention was that this should be done very sparingly for some years to come, so that the huge unwanted surplus might disappear by sheer lapse of time. No one already in the docks was to be squeezed out or to lose his livelihood, but the influx of men from other districts and other occupations should be checked. At Liverpool as at London the " recommended " man has been a grievance.[1] Registration puts an end to the " recommended " man.

We have described above how the distances between the various " stands " or places at which men are taken on, and the absence of correct information as to the number of men likely to be wanted, add to the precariousness of the docker's

[1] See p. 79.

life and increase the volume of casual labour. Men may be hanging about in one part of the dock on the chance of getting work and not know that within a short distance there is a demand for hands. These conditions obtained at Liverpool as at London. In order to remedy them the Joint Committee decided to erect " surplus stands " at intervals along the docks. These " surplus stands," fourteen in number, consisted of a telephone box and operator and a large blackboard on which information was chalked. Men were to be taken on as before at the various stands, but after the call (and there is only one morning call at Liverpool as against three at London) the men, instead of wandering about in search of work on vague or incorrect information, were to collect at the surplus stands. The foremen could then telephone from the shipping offices for as many men as they required.

The system of payment of wages at Liverpool was not so demoralising as at London, where men are paid daily, and it may be twice a day. All earnings at Liverpool were paid once a week, but it might very well happen that a man who had worked for several firms would have to spend a great part of Saturday morning going from

office to office collecting his money. The new proposal was that all earnings should be paid to a man in one sum. Every Friday evening shipping firms send in their wages sheets to a Clearing House; sixty clerks are busy all night sorting out the names and amounts; and on Saturday morning each docker gets all his earnings less insurance contribution in one lump sum. The employers are saved all trouble in connection with the Insurance Act, since the Clearing House keeps the cards and deducts the contributions, and where one man has worked for several employers in a week the contribution in respect of him is proportioned amongst them. The employers are charged twenty-five per cent. on their insurance contributions for the clerical work done by the Clearing Houses.

An immense amount of enthusiasm and patience was necessary to get the scheme into working order. A long series of negotiations took place before it was agreed to; employers and dockers were alike sceptical, and the memories of years of industrial bitterness stood between them. Mr. Lawrence Holt was largely instrumental in inducing the employers to accept the scheme, whilst Councillor James Sexton and Mr. George

Milligan, of the Dock Labourers' Union, used their influence with the men, the latter advocating it in an admirable paper which he edits for dockers, "The Mersey Workers' Magazine." In the end only one large shipping firm stood outside; twenty-one employers insisted on retaining in their own hands the payment of earnings, but consented to do it at the Clearing Houses and at the same time as the pooled wages of the other employers were being paid. The men on their side seemed inclined to throw over their union officials, apparently through the mistaken idea that the scheme would deprive some of their number of their livelihood. Explanatory leaflets had been circulated, but they do not seem to have been understood, or even read in many cases. Councillor Sexton, the Secretary of the Dock Labourers' Union, was howled down at a meeting when he attempted to explain the scheme, and in July, 1912, when it was to come into operation, there was a half-hearted strike, whilst at Birkenhead free labour had to be introduced before the opposition was overcome.

The initial difficulties of the scheme have now been overcome and it is possible to estimate the value of the experiment. The Joint Committees

appear to have worked very smoothly and the arrangements for payment of earnings seem on the whole to have been a success. There was a considerable difficulty about Saturday work. Clearly it was impossible for the wages sheets for work done on Saturdays to be sorted at the Clearing Houses in time for payment on the same day, and the original intention was that a week should be reckoned from Saturday to Friday. But the men refused to work on Saturday mornings unless they received their money on the same day. The employers found it necessary to " sub " for Saturday's work themselves, and so they did not get rid entirely of the actual payment in cash ; whilst the Labour Exchange officials after all their trouble had not the satisfaction of a complete record of employment and wages. At Liverpool the difficulty passed away, but at Birkenhead the men were more truculent and the question of Saturday pay caused a series of troublesome week-end strikes in the spring of 1915, and the men only returned to work after a visit from Lord Kitchener, whose supplies for munitions of war were being seriously delayed.

Neither registration nor the system of " surplus stands " have realised all the hopes of their pro-

moters, whose intention it was to stop the influx of newcomers into the docks until those already there were getting a reasonable amount of work. They aimed, as all reformers of casual labour must aim, at concentrating the work in a smaller number of hands. To do that it was necessary to secure rapid communication between foremen and dockers and to provide for an exchange of men between different parts of the docks. And here unfortunately the scheme has not received the support of those whom it was devised to benefit. Foremen and dockers alike have preferred the old muddling, wasteful methods of the chance engagement to the intelligent use of these surplus stands. Foremen would engage men by telephone and they would fail to put in an appearance. In short the surplus stands, as Mr. Williams says, were grossly abused. Even more serious has been the marked unwillingness of a large number of men to work for more than two or three days a week. The Liverpool experiment has made it perfectly clear that very many dockers are content if they can earn fifteen shillings a week and will not take more work if it is offered them. In consequence there have been shortages of men, and the Joint Committees have been compelled

to issue fresh tallies to meet the demands of the employers. It is true of course that work-shy men are a natural product of an evil system long continued; none the less their existence is a menace to the well-being of their fellow-dockers and a serious obstacle to any considerable improvement in the standard of living.

Like most attempts at reform the Liverpool scheme was over-rated at first, and has since been unduly depreciated. It has had to struggle against overwhelming difficulties. It is purely permissive; it had to deal with employers and men alike demoralised by years of casual labour and bitterly suspicious of one another. On the whole the results to date are not discouraging. The Liverpool scheme is the most hopeful accomplishment in the matter of dock labour since the London and India Docks reform in 1891. Similar schemes are in operation at Goole and other ports, and there is no doubt that the movement will spread. The London docks are less compact, and the wharves present a problem which is not met with at Liverpool. But there is no reason to believe the difficulties insuperable; and at all events they should not be formidable for such areas as the Victoria and Albert Docks.

CHAPTER VI

Suggestions for the Future

The problem of dock labour is that of a chronic over-supply of labour offering itself in response to demands which are irregular as to time and fluctuating in volume. It may be attacked from either side; we may endeavour to diminish the sources of supply, or we may seek to regularise the demand.

This glut of labour, as we have seen, is largely due to the fact that the docks offer opportunities to all the unfortunates of the industrial world. It is incidental therefore to the general mal-organisation of society, and every measure which raises the standard of life or increases its security will tend to correct this over-supply.

Many workers are spoilt at present during their years of adolescence and drift naturally into unskilled casual labour. There is not likely to be a great improvement in this respect until the school-leaving age is raised. In the meantime

Choice of Employment officers and Care Committees can do something to dissuade boys from entering blind-alley occupations or accepting notoriously harmful kinds of work, and can warn them against drifting from job to job. But sooner or later the fact will have to be faced that by no possible means can a boy of fourteen be turned into a man, and that a nation which persists in saddling its children with premature burdens is likely to find that a considerable number of them grow up to be burdens in turn upon it.

For the adult workers the Labour Exchanges are likely to do a great deal when once the unhappy prejudices of both employers and men have worn down. Probably a new generation accustomed from school-leaving days to dealing with Exchanges will take more kindly to them, and will give them the chance which they have never yet had of showing their worth. The scope of Unemployment Insurance is pretty sure to be extended, and that, together with the National Health Insurance, will increase the margin of the workers and give them greater staying power in times of trade depression or illness. Every increase of real wages will have the same effect.

Everything in short which increases the resources of the workers will lessen the number of those who have recourse to the docks.

But along with attempts to dry up the supply, or in advance of them, should go efforts to modify the form of the demand. This is by far the more hopeful task for the present. "The closing of all ways by which men fall into misfortune," says Mr. Beveridge, "must be the last step, not one of the first steps, in the destruction of poverty." [1] The unification of the labour market, the pooling of the reserves of labour, and the promotion of its fluidity, must occupy our attention for a good many years to come.

The "list" method of the London and India Docks Company has been described in the last chapter. The great objection to employing it on a large scale is that it does definitely take away work from some men in order to give more work to other men. The exceptional distress in the winter of 1892 was popularly attributed to its use and a Mansion House Fund was expended, not very successfully, in attempting to give relief. The dockers would certainly be suspicious of any scheme which applied the

[1] "Unemployment," p. 202.

"list" method sharply to the whole of the port of London, and would oppose it strenuously unless adequate provision were made for those displaced by it. But it would be difficult to make such provision. In the first place the number of men involved would be large; the surplus at London cannot be much less than 10,000 and is quite probably a good deal more. In the second place this surplus would consist for the most part of the inferior men, since the better men would naturally be chosen for the preference lists. There would therefore be something like 10,000 men of poor industrial quality to provide for, and it is not easy to see how they could be dealt with. Our experience of the relief of the unemployed in the past is not such as to make us contemplate the task with equanimity.

Moreover, it would be impossible to say definitely who was a displaced docker and who was not, since there is no sharp line at present to divide the docker proper from the general labourer who sometimes works in the docks, or from the loafer who takes whatever he can get in the way of relief and ekes out his family's earnings with a little work of his own.

Even if provision were offered for the men displaced there would be strong opposition from the kind of man who wants to work two or three days a week, and to whom the prospect of being placed on a list involving regular attendance or of being left with very little or no work would be equally repugnant. However one may feel inclined to condemn a man of this type one must admit that he is largely the creation of the system under which he has worked for so long, and that it is unreasonable to expect him to change his habits all at once. The statistics of the first year's working of the Liverpool scheme show how numerous this class is.[1] Their opposition would be very difficult to override.

Altogether the use of the "list" method would be attended by grave difficulties and hardships. It might be justified as a piece of social surgery, but it should not lightly be resorted to. Nor does it seem to be necessary, since we can follow a line of less resistance by closing the docks to newcomers as a preliminary measure. The man who is already in the ranks of the dockers has a kind of vested interest in his chance of work; the same can scarcely be said of the man who

[1] "The First Year's Working of the Liverpool Docks Scheme," by R. Williams, B.A., 1914, p. 98.

might come to the docks at some future time.

The Port of London Authority was enjoined by the constituting Act of 1908 to deal with the question of casual labour, but during the seven years of its existence it has done nothing in this respect except for its direct employees. Moreover, its unconciliatory attitude during labour disputes has made it so unpopular that to entrust to it the administration of any scheme of reform would be to court failure. It would be far better to create for the purpose a Joint Committee as at Liverpool on which employers and men would be represented in equal numbers, with subordinate Joint Committees for the various dock areas. As at Liverpool it would probably be necessary to give tallies at the outset to a good many men whose connection with the docks was slight. Once the registration was completed entry to the docks should be closed as rigidly as possible to newcomers, with the exception probably of sons of dockers whom their fathers wished to bring up to their occupation. Then time would be allowed for death and removal and the ordinary attrition to thin the ranks. In ten or fifteen years the surplus would be greatly diminished and the

way would be clear for a more thorough reform.

During this period everything possible should be done to promote the mobility of labour within the port. The present numerous calling-on places should be replaced by a few central stands. How many these should be and where they should be would obviously be matters for discussion by the subordinate Joint Committees with their local and technical knowledge. One would imagine that three calling-on places for dockers should suffice for the Victoria and Albert Docks instead of the existing dozen or so. The Joint Committees might very well take into consideration also the number and the times of the calls.

It is very important that the Joint Committees should be given sufficient power to enforce their decisions. The weakness of the Liverpool scheme has been its voluntary nature. Refractory minorities of employers and men have stood out of the scheme and robbed it of much of its value. Others had to be coaxed and wheedled into a reluctant consent. Conservative-minded foremen have ignored the new arrangements. No really effective reform is possible under such conditions.

How fast the surplus could be reduced would depend largely upon the men themselves. If, as at Liverpool, a large number of men persistently refused to work more than two or three days a week shortages of labour would soon occur, and the employers would ask for fresh registrations. An occasional local shortage should not be held to justify such a demand, but if the shortages were frequent and general it could not be resisted, and there would be a set-back to the reduction of the surplus. The men who rendered such a step necessary would be doing a great disservice to their fellows, and it is to be hoped that the general opinion would condemn them. Probably such occurrences would be fairly common at first and would diminish as men got used to their opportunities for more continuous work. The Joint Committee might well be authorised to prevent the working of excessive overtime. At present men work as much as twenty-four hours at a stretch. Apart from the physical mischief which they do, these long spells of work are bad, because the men are disposed to compensate themselves by long spells of idleness, and a type of man is created who is capable of intermittent efforts only and cannot be depended upon for steady work

How low the margin of men could be reduced would have to be determined by experiment. It is impossible to say in advance what is the least number possible for the maintenance of work at the docks. In theory it might seem that there should be no need for a number larger than the number employed on the busiest day of the year. In practice a very considerable margin might be needed. Mobility would not be perfect ; every man would not be available for every job. The distances between the various docks are great, and communication is often defective, so that the transfer of men from dock to dock would involve too great a loss of time. Some improvement might be made with advantage in the means of communication between the various docks and between various parts of the same dock.

The specialisation of labour is another obstacle. The public is apt to think of dock workers as if they were all of a type, doing the same kind of work and getting the same rate of pay. But as a matter of fact there are many grades and many social strata. The lightermen and the stevedores stand, of course, quite apart from the dockers; they are skilled workers protected by strong trade unions. Amongst the dockers themselves

we have the grain-porters and the timber-porters, requiring exceptional powers of physical endurance and rewarded by special rates of pay. And there are other less clearly marked specialisations. One set of men will be used to handling orange boxes, another set chemicals, and a third set of men frozen meat. And it is quite likely that each of these sets of men will object to handling any other kind of cargo but that they are accustomed to. Mr. W. M. Langdon, an acute student of the subject, says :

" It is in this artificial and unnecessary specialisation that we meet one of the greatest difficulties to any reform of labour at the docks. . . . The evil does not lie in the nature of the work ; the work is not so specialised that one man might not easily learn to deal efficiently with many types of cargo and many sorts of boats ; the evil lies in the attitude which the workers have assumed towards their work, under the influence of present labour conditions. Nor is it merely in habit and the frame of mind it engenders, that we shall meet obstacles. Pride has its place also in the heart of a docker. Such pride in the superior job, in the traditions of a profession, these are needed to make any occupation healthy, but not

in the exaggerated form in which they are seen at the docks. The man who has been used to his orange boxes will object to mere trucking on days when there are no orange boats in the port. At the present time you may often see men accustomed to bulk grain work at Rotherhithe who would rather starve than do the machine work, for which Millwall is crying for men. Any scheme of decasualisation would have to realise this difficulty, that to put men who have been doing skilled work into work of less skill, and still more to attack the dignity of the worker by asking him to do the absolutely unskilled work, when he has been accustomed to work which in his own mind guaranteed a certain social position, would meet with the bitterest opposition. That it will be necessary to separate certain specialised branches of dock work, such as timber, coal and grain work, there can be no doubt. But mobility of labour elsewhere will be hindered partly by pride and partly by that fear which is seen in every large labour organisation, where the workers are graded, the fear lest one worker should trespass upon the province of another. It is a legitimate fear where the grounds for differentiating workers are genuine, and where

the result of such differentiation is profitable to the industry involved. There is no need for such specialisation in the docks as now exists." [1]

Here again it will depend upon the dockers themselves how far and how fast the numbers at the docks can be reduced. If unnecessary barriers are maintained each kind of work will require its separate reserve of men to meet its maximum needs, and the total reserve necessary for the working of the docks will be very much increased. And the larger the reserve, the greater, of course, will be the number of men unemployed on slack days. Exactly in proportion as the docker is able and willing to be a handy man dealing with many kinds of cargo his employment can be increased. There may be good reasons for maintaining the barriers in any particular case, but it is important that the dockers should realise and balance against them the corresponding disadvantages. At Liverpool, it should be noted, the grain men do not form a separate class, and the timber men, though they require special strength and knack and earn a

[1] "Toynbee Record," March, 1912.

special rate, are willing to work on other cargoes when there is no timber to be handled.[1]

A further reduction is possible in the number of men whom it is necessary to have in waiting in order to meet the fluctuating demands. There are marked seasonal variations in employment at the docks. Work is usually brisk in December and January and to a less degree in July; it is slack in August and September. It has several times been suggested that some kind of dovetailing with other trades should be possible. Already it goes on to some extent. Builders' men come to the docks in winter when their own trade is slack. Gasworkers are available in July. This movement of labour might well be more scientifically organised. Special tallies could be issued for a month only and might be reserved for men from specified seasonal trades. On the other hand many dockers go hopping and harvesting in August and September. It would seem as if the difficulties of seasonal fluctuations could be largely met by dovetailing.

The problem will by this time have been a great deal simplified and the necessary reserve of

[1] See also Miss Eleanor Rathbone's "Inquiry into the Condition of Labour at the Liverpool Docks," 1904, p. 22.

labour will have been reduced within comparatively narrow limits. It should be possible to attempt more sweeping reforms. But we may fairly expect that a considerable change will have taken place already in the condition of the men. The dockers whom we shall have to consider in our future adjustments will not be the dockers of to-day. Few, we may suppose, will be getting less than three days' work a week, unless they are unwilling to take it, and the greater number will be getting four and five days a week. This in itself will be an enormous improvement on present-day conditions, and it will, doubtless, make a big difference in the quality of the men. They will be better fed and better clothed, altogether more competent and more self-respecting. Almost certainly their trade union would be much stronger. The Dockers' Union struggles against insuperable difficulties at present. The men are too miserable and too broken-spirited to combine effectively. Many of them can ill afford the subscription, and in bad times they let their membership lapse. The industrial failures from whom dock labour is so largely recruited, many of them looking upon it as a temporary expedient, do not make good trade unionists. But when

entry to the docks is closed or closely regulated, and when the majority of the men are earning something like a living wage, it will be strange indeed if the Dockers' Union does not succeed in organising the whole of the labour. In this respect the protection afforded by the register will give a stimulus to trade unionism at the docks comparable to that which has been given by the Trade Boards to trade unionism in the sweated industries. Short-sighted employers may regard the prospect with alarm, but the wiser of them will realise that it is better to have to deal with a strong and representative trade union than with a body whose authority is uncertain, and which is strong enough to make mischief but not strong enough to enforce adherence to the bargains which it makes. And to every keen trade unionist there is the greatest incentive, if only he realised it, to advocate and promote decasualisation.

It would now be possible to create preference lists or even a permanent staff without the serious consequences in the way of displacement of labour which would result from such a procedure at the present time. A certain number of men would have to be removed from the docks to be

pensioned, emigrated, put on labour colonies, or otherwise dealt with according to their circumstances. But the number of men deprived of work would no longer be so large, and it would be definite. By registration and the regulation of the entry the problem would have been made measurable and manageable.

So far we have supposed labour to be engaged as at present by a number of different employers. But for our next adjustment it will be necessary to have a central control of labour. Where employers could guarantee their men a reasonable minimum period of engagement (say a week) or reasonable minimum earnings, they might continue to engage their men directly. But for their odd men they should be compelled to draw on the central body of men. The central employer, whether it be the Joint Committee or some other body, would hire men round to the various firms for short engagements just as typewriting offices send out typists or master florists send out gardeners at the present time.

As time went by the old men who had been retired from the lists might well be placed upon a special list and be called upon in emergencies. Many of them would be capable of occasional

work when they were unfitted for the strain of regular attendance. This use of the old as a reserve of labour occurs to-day in a good many occupations, and it would supply another means of meeting fluctuations.

There is one more expedient to consider. If there were still occasional demands for extra men the Labour Exchanges might very well be asked to supply them from those whose names were on their books as seekers for employment. These men would be casuals, but they would not be a casualising influence; they would be sent to definite work, and when it was done they would not remain to compete with the regular docker and to undergo a process of demoralisation themselves. Naturally these men could only be used for the simplest kinds of dock work, but that is the case to-day with the men upon whom the employer is forced to fall back in times of exceptional business.

Whether it would be necessary to rest at preference lists with guaranteed minimum earnings or whether it would be possible to push matters a stage further and carry on the work of the docks by a permanent staff, it is difficult to say on the existing data. Nor is it a question which we are

called upon to answer at the present time. What is certain is that the evils of casual labour can be immensely reduced. The direction in which we ought to move is certain ; how far we can go in it will appear more clearly in the light of experience. But the principle to keep in view is that the burden of finding the balance of a living ought to be transferred from the docker to his employers. If the shipping industry must have men in waiting then it should pay those men for being in waiting. But as a matter of fact if employers had to pay for their men's time whether they were actually at work or only in reserve, they would soon find methods of organisation which would prevent any considerable wastage of labour.

It is useless to disguise the fact that schemes of decasualisation are not popular either with the employers or with the men. The docker, like most men whose lives are hard and whose outlook is narrow, is very suspicious of any change the exact effect of which he cannot foresee. Working men for the most part, while they may be willing to remodel society in their speculations, are extremely conservative in the details of their own lives. The docker will not

like being registered ; it will savour to him of the bureaucratic methods which most Englishmen so cordially detest. He will be afraid, too, lest it should enable a vindictive employer to trace an offending employee and get him boycotted over the whole area of the docks. These prejudices of the docker must be met and overcome ; he must be familiarised with the purpose and the machinery of any scheme before it is set in operation. Much of the trouble at Liverpool seems to have been due to the lack of sufficient preparation of this sort.

The docker is generally afraid that any scheme of decasualisation will take away the work from some of the men without making any provision for them ; it must be clearly explained to him that this would not occur under such a scheme as that outlined above. It may, of course, still be objected that the men who used to come to the docks from other trades will be in a worse position than before, but this objection is more likely to come from other people and not from the dockers. The answer to it takes several forms. In the first place it is a doubtful kindness to an unemployed man to allow him to become a casual labourer. In the second place, as we have pointed out in a

previous chapter, the unemployed man who gets work at the docks obtains it exactly at the expense of some one else ; one man is relieved but another man is thrust beneath the subsistence level. There are casual fringes round a good many trades, and if the entry to the docks were closed many of the unemployed would doubtless find their way into them. But as trade after trade was organised the possibilities of obtaining casual labour would tend to disappear ; a man would be either employed or unemployed. It might seem that this is applying on a large scale the squeezing out process from which we have shrunk in the particular case of the docker. But there is this big difference that the men whom we should have to deal with would be displaced regular men. Much can be done for an unemployed man fresh from permanent work ; little can be done for an under-employed man, our typical casual labourer. We must attack the problem of unemployment from many sides, but we shall find that it must be dealt with trade by trade, and that the problem of casual labour lies across the threshold of reform. It is clear at all events that by closing the entry we do not increase the volume of unemployment and that

we have as a positive gain the possibility of organising a trade.[1]

Another objection commonly heard amongst dockers is that regular work is long, monotonous and ill-paid. This is the complaint not only of demoralised men, but of men of good character and standing. There is certainly some ground for it. Employers sometimes seem to think that if they give regular work they are justified in offering a very small wage. Naturally a large number of men prefer the chance of earning bigger money by casual work. It should be made clear that the conditions under which any permanent staff is engaged will be reasonable; the purpose of decasualisation is to improve the

[1] Cf. Messrs. Jackson & Pringle—"From the great stress laid in these pages upon the evils of the custom of short temporary engagements—casual labour—we may be suspected of imagining that the social problem would disappear if all workmen were engaged as permanent employees, oblivious of the possibility of there being an actual surplus of labour which would remain in an aggravated form when short engagements had been abolished. We recognize an overstocked labour market as a wider cause of social confusion, one of the symptoms of which is casual employment. Our reasons for paying such exclusive attention to casual employments are, first, that the existence and extent of the oversupply of labour cannot be measured while short engagements continue, because this practice may spread over more workmen than long engagements would. Second, that the whole system at present in vogue for relieving the 'unemployed' is vitiated by the presence of overwhelming numbers of short engagement men in need of relief."—Poor Law Commission, 1908. App. Vol. XIX., p. 647.

condition of the men and not to replace one bad set of conditions by another. The present sixty hour week is a long one. Sooner or later the docks will adopt an eight-hour day which will allow a convenient arrangement of three shifts when continuous work is necessary.

On the part of the foremen there is a strong objection to anything which would take the choice of men out of their hands. Every foreman likes to pick his own men ; it is pleasant to confer a favour, and it gives him a kind of feudal position. Sometimes, of course, there is gross abuse of power. And the insecurity of tenure strengthens his hands in dealing with a somewhat troublesome set of men. It is sometimes asserted both by foremen and by their employers that if men were sure of employment they would not work so well, and dockers themselves assert that a half-starved casual will work furiously in the hope of establishing a footing. Against this we have the testimony of the Superintendent of the London and India Docks Company and the action of the Port of London Authority in 1915.[1] One would certainly think that to keep men dangling on the verge of unemployment in order to extract the

[1] See p. 98.

last ounce of effort out of them was against common sense as well as being a refinement of cruelty unworthy of a civilised community.

The apathy of the big employers who regard labour as a "bagatelle"[1] is a serious obstacle to any scheme of reform. Where there is not apathy there is too often hostility. The employers are very much afraid of possible shortages of labour which would mean expensive delays, and they are afraid, too, of increasing the power of unions. The problem of casual labour is terribly complicated by the bad relations between the employers and the men. It is not so difficult to think out a workable scheme to improve present conditions as it is to induce employers and men to co-operate in any way. Each party is anxious not to give the slightest advantage to the other or to place it in a more favourable position in any future labour dispute. The increasing bitterness between employers and men all over the industrial world is indeed one of the most disquieting features of the present time, and it is safe to prophesy that if it continues unchecked it will lead to a catastrophe as overwhelming as

[1] See p. 25.

that into which our international jealousies have plunged us.

Casual labour is a complicated and insidious evil, and the extent of its ravages and the manner in which it operates are very imperfectly realised by the general public and even by many of its victims. In the hope that it may help to a better understanding of the problem and hasten in some small degree the day when its solution shall be seriously attempted this book is issued by one who lives in a dock district, and is compelled to witness day by day the havoc which casual labour makes of human life.

POSTSCRIPT

Most of the information for this book had been collected, and part of the book had been written, before the outbreak of war. Conditions have, of course, been profoundly modified for the time being. A large number of dock workers went abroad on military or transport work in the first weeks of the war. Against this there was a flow of fresh labour to the docks, partly from trades which were badly hit, and partly of men whose employers had dismissed them in the hope that they would enlist.

The severity of competition for work eased rapidly, though there was still often a surplus at a "call." By the end of 1914 there was a marked congestion in the Port of London. This was due in large measure to the fact that the warehouse accommodation and the supply of river craft were insufficient to meet the extraordinary demands made upon them by the diversion of shipping to London from other ports. There

were also, undoubtedly, local shortages of labour. A great deal was made of these by the newspapers, and the exaggerated reports of scarcity of labour and of high earnings brought a fresh rush of men to the docks. The main facts about the supply of labour at the time seem to have been :

(1) Some thousands of the most efficient dockers were gone, and with a large proportion of less experienced men the work naturally took longer.

(2) The chaotic system of chance engagements at some scores of isolated stands was wasteful of labour. Even during the period of greatest congestion there were dockers who sometimes failed to get work. All the checks to the flow of labour enumerated above[1] were in operation. The casual labour system as it is worked at the docks requires a considerable reserve of men, which at this time the country could ill spare.

(3) Many of the men worked long hours, and sometimes seven days a week. But there were, undoubtedly, others who were still unwilling to work more than two or three days a week. Indignant shipowners wrote to the newspapers to say that the " lazy docker " wouldn't work, and that he ought to be put under military control and be

[1] See pp. 95-6, and 118-123.

made to work. The suggestion came badly from men who had not troubled their heads about the docker in normal times, and whose slovenly and heartless methods of engagement had contributed more than anything else to make him what he was.

Speaking broadly, one of the most remarkable and encouraging features of the industrial position during the war has been the disappearance of the so-called "unemployable." Men have for the most part shown themselves pathetically eager to obtain work. Old men have come out of the workhouse, and sick men have come out of the infirmary, and in the latter case there have been remarkable recoveries of health under the influence of that most potent of drugs, new hope. Men felt that there was a chance for them at last, that employers would look at them now. Many miserable homes have been transformed by the war—a strange commentary on our social arrangements in time of peace. But some men had gone too far in degradation, physical or moral, to recover; and there were many such in the great fringe of labour at the docks.

It is hazardous to attempt to prophesy what will happen at the close of the war. We remember how wrong most of the prophets were at the

beginning of the war. We can only speak of possibilities. There must be a second readjustment of industry, and it will not be eased, as the transition at the beginning of the war was eased, by enlistment and by huge Government spending. It is difficult to see how the disbanded armies are to be re-absorbed in civil occupations. It may be, as some think, that we shall have widespread unemployment soon after the war ends. Or it may come a few years later. In either case the docks would almost certainly be flooded with fresh labour, unless precautions were taken. Even without that there would probably be a formidable surplus of men, since a large number of men will have returned to their old occupation, whilst those who came to the docks during the war will probably have remained. A further serious problem will be the disposal of the thousands of boys who at present are earning big money by excessively long hours at piece-work of an uneducative nature. At Woolwich Arsenal alone there are some ten thousand boys employed. Most of these boys are in the Arsenal in alternate weeks from 8 a.m. till 8 p.m. or from 8 p.m. till 8 a.m. The majority have a journey of well over an hour both to and from their work. It is obvious that

the strain must be injurious to the boys. We shall have thousands of lads, impaired in physique, and without a trade to their fingers, thrown on the labour market after the war, and there is the gravest danger that they may become casual labourers.

The prospect of new and greater crowds of men competing furiously for work at the docks is intolerable. Machinery for regulating the influx of fresh labour ought to be set up immediately the war ends, if not earlier.

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